

# Stafford L. JAMES

Musician & Composer  
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Stafford James has been in the front lines for 30 years. He is thankful for the early encouragement he received from artists like Miles Davis, Herbie Hancock, McCoy Tyner and his mentor, bass giant Charles Mingus. "I will always appreciate the way he approached me as a young musician trying to get out of the bucket and find my own direction". He recorded with the legendary Albert Ayler ("Music is the Healing Force"), with Dexter Gordon (including "Home Coming"), with the fusion oriented guitarist John Scofield, with Jimmy Heath, Pharoah Sanders and nine albums with the late trumpeter Woody Shaw. The last 15 years have been solely dedicated to his ensemble, The **Stafford James Project**.

*"The past 15 years of my life have been dedicated to composing music for the contrabass as a lead melodic voice, from duet to string orchestra, and to playing the music with my group the **STAFFORD JAMES PROJECT**." S.J.*

## PLAYING CONTRABASS WITH A DIFFERENCE

**"In trio formation the **Stafford James Project** resembles a traditional Jazz trio in its instrumentation. However, the role of the pianist and of the drummer becomes one that gives the listener a different perspective of the functionalism of each particular instrument.**

For example, when I was performing with *Art Blakey & the Jazz Messengers*, my first lesson, from a rhythmic perspective, was to understand how the bass drum pulsation on each beat, gave the "walking bass line" a support that made each note stand out. This, in conjunction with cristal clear "socks" and a "hip-ride" gave rhythmic clarity to the music. Therefore, the drummer, to my mind and in this instance, is also in theory taking on a melodic as well as a rhythmic function.

**This is the core to the concept of the trio with, and when the contrabass is the lead melodic voice. It is the sensitivity of the "harmonic and rhythmic color" of piano and drums that gives the concept a unique quality. The functional identities of each instrument have not changed, only shifted.**

**The music is still alive, with a beating heart." S.J.**

Photo: courtesy of Frédéric HUIJBREGTS  
<http://www.fh-photo.com>



## A SHORT SELECTION OF CRITICS - IN ENGLISH AND IN FRENCH

.....James is anything but traditional. With a potent mixture of talent and tenacity, he's been forging a new identity for his instrument over the last two decades. James is renowned for the richness and fluidity of his arco-playing which allows him to hold the main melody, featuring the bass as lead instrument. ... In many ways the most difficult part of his battle is trying to persuade listeners to confront their preconceptions about the contrabass. ... (Tim Baker. *The Paris Free Voice*)

« Hörerlebnis mit Bässen und guten Effekten » (Acoustic experience with contrabassists gives tremendous effect)

With an unusual formation, the "Special Project" of Contrabassist Stafford James, demonstrated that the instruments otherwise known as the "valets of rhythm" have much more to offer as soloists. A complete mastery of instruments and the brilliant sound of Stafford James and his partner proved once again that the contrabass is a formidable lead melodic instrument in Jazz. ....The ambience created by their sound together with the excellent effects from drums and percussions made of this "Jazz-special" one of the most powerful of its kind at Satiricon Theatre. (DA. *Stadtteil-Zeitung*)

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« Getting to First Bass »

..... Today, Stafford James is in the forefront of virtuoso players of the instrument ....

**(W. Royal Stokes. The Washington Post)**

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"Unlike most jazz groupings of piano and bass, the pianist Mark Cohen and the bassist Stafford James not only think of themselves as a team rather than as a pianist with accompaniment but the predominant voice in the duo is Mr. James's bass. .... Mr. James does all the arranging, although they both contribute compositions. He is imaginative and inventive both in his solos and in the harmonic situations he establishes with Mr. Cohen.... Within a single set at Zinno, 126 West 13th Street, where they played through Saturday, Mr. James was able to show the central core that he creates for the duo on "Green Dolphin Street," to play a bowed solo that soared with singing warmth on "In a Sentimental Mood," to bring color and texture to a composition by Mr. Cohen and a darkly inviting melody to one of his own pieces, winding up with a display of be-bop virtuosity on "Walkin'." In the face of Mr. James's compelling performance, the duo's goal of balance and teamwork kept slipping away, becoming instead a showcase for the versatile Mr. James." **(John Wilson – New York Times)**

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« Jazz: Virtuoso on Bass »

... Mr James is a fluid, virtuosic bassist. ... His bass solos, wonderfully complex and intense constructions with a logic of their own, are inevitably highlights of performances by the groups he plays with .... The music, all composed by Mr James, struck an intelligent balance between what might be loosely termed the mainstream and the avant-garde. ... One would not want to change a thing. **(Robert Palmer. The New York Times)**

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« Jazzmusiker im Tiefenrausch »

... a contrabass, drums and percussion ..and another contrabass – the best conditions to dive into organised ecstasy. Anyone who could think that this is an impossible team, does not know Stafford James... His musique also fits in the category of accomplished form and of perfect taste. One would have liked to take it home on a CD....

**(Reutlinger Generalanzeiger)**

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Bassist Stafford James, a true virtuoso, played the most modern music of the festival. ...this serious music featured close communication between the band members, with lots of impressive bowed bass solos from Stafford James

**(Jazz Link. Telluride Jazz Festival Review)**

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« Stafford James: The "Musics" of an abstemious eclectic »

.... "Musicians should understand the cause and effect of what they are doing. We should not just play songs that everybody knows. There are spiritual connotations to be aware of. All the rivers lead to the sea, and the sea is bigger than the total of the streams. That is the basis of my eclecticism" ..... **(S. James interviewed by Mike Zwerin - Herald Tribune)**

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« Stafford James: sensible et dramatique »

... formation inédite ... concert totalement passionnant .... tant par l'approche originale et surprenante de la musique que dans sa forme et sa nature expressive ... A la fois réflexive et swinguante, la musique du Special Project de Stafford James fonde sa densité et sa force spirituelle sur une énergie sans faille et une disponibilité totale des musiciens ... le public a été frappé par l'originalité des idées développées, la virtuosité, ... Aux moments de pure énergie ont succédé d'autres plus propices à l'installation de climats captivants. ... ce quartet hors normes mais tellement représentatif de ce que doit être le jazz: libre et inventif. **(le Républicain Lorrain).**

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« Jazz de cordes et de rythmes »

...Une formation d'envergure dirigée par le contrebassiste et compositeur américain Stafford James a fait vibrer l'auditorium du casino au cours d'un concert de deux heures qui a fortement impressionné le public. ... On peut dire a présent qu'il joue aussi de la contrebasse comme un compositeur. ... L'instrumentation de son groupe, le "Special Project" est originale et surprenante avec deux contrebassistes, un percussionniste et un batteur. .... L'ambiance générale de la musique reste "groovy" et il en émane même des pulsions de danse nettement tribales. Davantage que les mélodies, les improvisations ou le jeu du leader – à l'archet la plupart du temps – c'est l'unité rythmique qui domine et capte l'attention. .... La base rythmique en dehors d'un magnifique duo de contrebasses, fut constamment roborative avec des riffs entêtants, foisonnants de nuances et de couleurs. ... Les pièces jouées furent assez sophistiquées et les alliages de timbres souvent contemporains ... Ce qui a permis paradoxalement de diversifier et d'aérer la musique d'une gravité formelle et de lui conserver un "beat" jazz d'une grande souplesse. ... Ce croisement d'énergies qui se confortent mutuellement, donnent non seulement un sens à la musique et au spectacle mais peuvent aussi servir d'exemple d'une vraie communication dans un collectif qui se donne pour objectif l'investigation créative.

**(Dernières Nouvelles d'Alsace)**

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Stafford James est un bijou rare, un magicien superbe à la technique de l'arco – ou archet – aussi bien qu'à celle du "pizzicato" ou corde pincée. Il est étonnant mélodiste et compositeur raffiné. **(Nighthawk. Toulouse)**

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« La contrebasse donne le ton »

... Les compositions de James donnent une place centrale à la contrebasse dans un ensemble harmonieux. C'est du vrai jazz: surprenant, improvisé mais vaste, agréable, professionnel, touchant. ... Une musique qu'on n'oublie pas rapidement et qu'il faut faire revenir. **(Peuple Libre)**

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**See Stafford James' documented life story and view his exciting photo gallery on his official website  
<http://www.staffordjames.com>**