

# Continental Drift

Photo: © Jean-Pierre Dubé

**Donny McCaslin**

## Local expatriates score in the Big Apple

By Liz Barrett

It's a generally accepted fact that New York City is the center of the jazz universe, but most people don't realize that a disproportionate number of the Big Apple's current and rising jazz stars started out in Santa Cruz. They studied in local high school music programs, were coached by Ray Brown at Cabrillo College, played in honor bands, and spent their summers in jazz camps at the Kuumbwa Jazz Center, the Stanford Jazz Workshop, and the Monterey Jazz Festival.

Every few years, a wave of these talented musicians leaves the Central Coast to pursue their dreams in New York—and they often gravitate toward each other once they get there. Internationally acclaimed saxophone star Donny McCaslin, 48, has two Grammy nominations and is a featured soloist on David Bowie's new album, "Nothing Has Changed." McCaslin, who grew up in Aptos, recently performed with 28-year-old pianist/composer Pascal Le Boeuf, a Santa Cruz native and graduate of Pacific Collegiate School, at the Jazz Standard, a major venue in New York. Le Boeuf and another PCS alumnus, 25-year-old saxophonist Ben Flocks from Bonny Doon, now teach at the prestigious Calhoun School on New York's Upper West Side, where the jazz program is run by pianist Victor Lin. Lin taught Flocks and Le Boeuf (and many others) at the Stanford Jazz Workshop. These are just a few examples of the intimately interwoven Santa Cruz-New York jazz connection.

In keeping with the rich tradition of music education they share, the more experienced émigrés often encourage the new arrivals.

Le Boeuf recalled the first time he and his twin brother, composer / saxophonist Remy, played with McCaslin in the big city. The Le Boeuf Brothers were just 20 at the time, hailed as jazz prodigies.

"When my brother and I played our first show at Dizzy's Club Coca Cola, the jazz club at Lincoln Center, we asked Donny to play in our band," Le Boeuf said. "That was the first time I played with Donny. He was very supportive of our music. He didn't treat us like underlings. He treated us like equals, despite the discrepancy in age and experience."

McCaslin, who teaches at the Manhattan School of Music and the New England Conservatory, taught some of Santa Cruz's rising stars when they were just kids. He recalled giving a lesson to sax player Jesse Scheinin, now 25, back when he was only 14 years old. Even then, Scheinin was brimming with talent, McCaslin said. Flocks also remembered how accomplished Scheinin was back then.

"The first time I really started to get serious about music was at PCS," Flocks said. "A lot of my peers, like Jesse Scheinin, were playing at such a high level at a young age that it was really inspiring to me to see them and hear them doing it. It helped me realize I could do it, too."





**Jeff Ballard**  
(center)

Another Santa Cruz expat who has carried out the tradition of helping younger musicians is drummer Jeff Ballard, who plays with sax great Joshua Redman and has toured with pianist Chick Corea, Ray Charles, and guitarist Pat Metheny. Ballard, 51, has mentored many younger musicians, including 37-year-old Smith Dobson V, son of the influential jazz pianist who died in a car accident in 2001. The younger Dobson was a drummer but now plays saxophone. He stayed in the Bay Area, but his sister, singer-songwriter-guitarist Sarah Dobson, moved to New York back in 1997, when she was just 17 years old, and quickly found her place in the jazz scene. Now 35, she still tours with Norah Jones, and is a member of alternative country trio Puss n Boots with Jones and bassist/vocalist Catherine Popper.

Drummer Kenny Wollesen and bassist Corin Stiggall migrated to New York around the same time as Ballard and McCaslin. Wollesen, 48, has recorded and toured with all kinds of musicians, including Tom Waits, Sean Lennon, avant garde icon John Zorn, guitarist John Scofield and many others. He still tours regularly with guitarist Bill Frisell. Stiggall, 47, has played with drummer Billy Higgins, pianist George Cables, and pianist Freddie Redd. He now plays in a trio with guitarist Joe Cohn and tenor sax player Grant Stewart.

There is a warm symbiosis among these many remarkable musicians, but like the redwood trees they left behind, no two of them are alike. Each of the latest Santa Cruz jazz émigrés — Pascal Le Boeuf, Remy Le Boeuf, Ben Flocks, and Jesse Scheinin — has his own story and his own way of telling it.

### Pascal Le Boeuf

Pascal Le Boeuf and his brother Remy are identical twins. They made a huge splash on the New York jazz scene as the Le Boeuf Brothers, but they have separate identities, interests, and musical projects as well. Pascal currently

plays in four other bands: Pascal's Triangle, a jazz trio with bassist Linda Oh and drummer Justin Brown; Kissy Girls, a trip-hop duo with singer-songwriter Emily Greene (Passion Pit); King Pony, a rock band with guitarists Billy Norris (Gavin DeGraw), Adam Levy (Norah Jones), and Armand Hirsch (Bobby McFerrin); and Jesus on the Mainline, an eclectic 15-piece rock-indie-funk band led by Grammy-nominated trumpeter Andrew Neesley.

"You have to work hard to put it all together, but it's what I love to do," said the pianist, who above all is a composer. "I like making records and cutting albums — I like the recording process and composing for that. It's the motivation that underlies my artistry. I am involved in all of these projects now because I like to compose different kinds of music."

Pascal's richly varied compositions have not gone unnoticed. He has received ASCAP Young Jazz Composer awards almost every year since 2004, and was again selected in 2015. He won eight consecutive Downbeat Student Music Awards for original compositions (2003 to 2010), along with Independent Music Awards for best dance/electronic song and best eclectic song in 2012. And he was

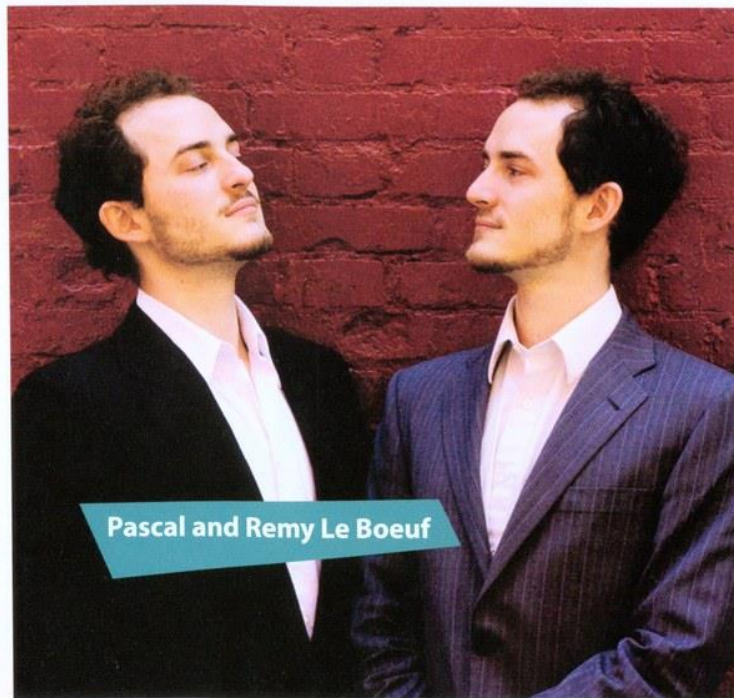
the youngest artist ever to receive the Quincy Jones Commission for Emerging Composers, back in 2003. His impressive string of awards is too long to list here.

He and Remy grew up in a supportive family environment. Both parents, Joanne Reiter and Bernie Le Boeuf, hold doctorates in biology; Bernie teaches at UC Santa Cruz. Their sister Adria, now 34, studied Shakespeare before she became a neurophysicist at the University of Lausanne (Switzerland); she founded a science-theater collective there. It's easy to see where Pascal and Remy got their penchant for eclecticism.

"The Bay Area as a whole values artistry," Pascal said. "Santa Cruz is more open-minded in a certain way because of the culture that surrounds it. Growing up there instilled in me the idea that I should embrace the difference in what I do. If I like something and it's different from everyone else, that's all the more reason to pursue it. That's part of being in the jazz world; we're doing things that are different and innovative."

Pascal first got interested in jazz when he was about 12 years old and took after-school piano lessons from New Music Works co-founder Gene Lewis.

"He instilled a love for jazz and got Remy and me excited about it," Pascal said. When Lewis died the next year, it deeply affected Pas-



**Pascal and Remy Le Boeuf**

Photo: Andrea Boccia

Photo: Adria Le Boeuf





**Jesse Scheinin**

cal. "He had written a piece for me and Remy, and when he died I wrote a piece for him. The same thing happened when Smith Dobson died. That was also intense. For me, at that age, the way to deal with those feelings was to write music. That's what they would have wanted."

Pascal used the song he wrote for Dobson as an audition piece for the Stanford Jazz Workshop. Along the way, he also studied privately with pianist Murray Low, organist Steve Czarnecki, and classical pianist Ivan Rosenblum, among others.

"But the main influence for Remy and me was Ray Brown at Cabrillo," Pascal said. "He really got us on board with all the jazz training by teaching us basic theory and improvisation skills, like arranging. He was the real deal."

Pascal continues that tradition, teaching at the prestigious Calhoun School on New York's Upper West Side, the Manhattan School of Music summer program, and the Stanford Jazz Workshop.

"Education is always going to be a part of what I do," he said. He likes living in the jazz Mecca of New York, where he's been for 10 years now, but there are things he still misses about Santa Cruz.

"I miss nature," he said. "I miss the silence." Check [pascalboeuf.com](http://pascalboeuf.com) for Bay Area dates.

## Remy Le Boeuf

Remy Le Boeuf plays saxophone, but he's more than a gifted performer. Like his twin brother, he's an extraordinary composer with eclectic tastes. He, too, has collected too many awards to list, including numerous ASCAP Foundation Young Jazz Composer Awards, Downbeat Student Awards, Independent Music Awards, and a West Coast Songwriters Award. One of his masterful accomplishments was fulfilling a Chamber Music America New Jazz Works Commission to write a large chamber work based on the short stories of Franz Kafka. Achieving so much at such a young age can have a downside, though.

"We have been perceived as these prodigious jazz kids," Remy said. "We're trying to get away from being perceived as *wunderkind*. We're seen for that rather than for our artistry or what we're expressing."

Remy's artistry comes, in part, from a broad music background. Long before he studied jazz with Ray Brown, he learned to play oboe with Carol Panofsky (Santa Cruz Symphony). He performed with the Cabrillo Youth Choir, the Santa Cruz Youth Symphony, and the Soquel Opera. Then he studied saxophone with Dale Mills, Dan Zinn, and former Kuumbwa Honor Band director Steve Wilson, and others.

"The Stanford Jazz Workshop was eye-

opening to me as a 13-year-old," he said.

Now Remy is opening other students' eyes at the Manhattan School of Music summer program and the Great Neck Music Conservatory. Some of those students live in places that don't have a strong jazz education community, so they take private lessons with him via Skype during the rest of the year.

He loves living in New York with its vast community of jazz musicians, but a few years ago he moved to Los Angeles for awhile to take a break and get a fresh perspective.

"Los Angeles has a great jazz community," Remy said. "There are a lot of excellent players; it's very diverse. I wanted to explore different music. I played with an indie rock band for awhile (Wildcat Wildcat) and I also got to play with Bob Mintzer's Big Band, which was a big deal for me."

Now he's back in Brooklyn and working on new projects. Life is good. But he still misses Santa Cruz sometimes.

"I miss the redwood trees," he said. "I go back as often as I can. I miss the community, and I want to be a part of it even though I'm not there physically much of the time. I have a great sense of pride in being from Santa Cruz. It's a magical place."

The Le Boeuf Brothers will play at Kuumbwa on April 30. Check [leboeufbrothers.com](http://leboeufbrothers.com) for other Bay Area dates.

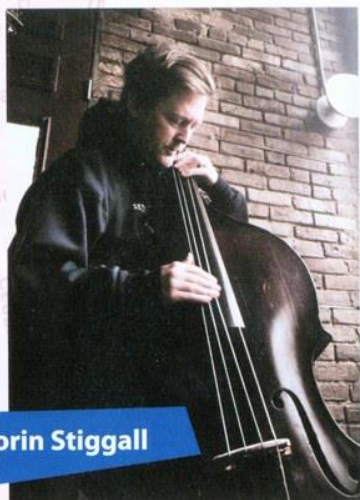
## Jesse Scheinin

If you walk around New York City, you may see Jesse Scheinin performing on the streets or in a park. His viral YouTube video, "Dueling Saxophones," was shot on the street after a stranger asked he and his friend Eddie Barbash to play a song. The video got a million views right away (almost 2 million to date) and led to a spot in the PBS film, "Opus Jazz."

Scheinin's fearless spontaneity works to his favor as an artist who refuses to be pigeonholed. A gifted saxophonist, he's also a singer, songwriter, and actor. Like his fellow Santa Cruz 20-something jazz émigrés, he likes to push the boundaries between jazz and other genres. His band Jesse and Forever is as much theater as music. He has performed at major jazz venues like the Blue Note, the Panama Jazz Festival, the Umbria Jazz Festival, the Monterey Jazz Festival, and Kuumbwa, and he also acted in Guggenheim Fellow playwright Tina Howe's one-act play "Breaking the Spell." That kind of creative divergence is endemic to Santa Cruz.

"In Santa Cruz, with so many great musicians coming through — and local artists as well — it's almost like growing up New York or Chicago or San Francisco," Scheinin said. "Santa Cruz has such a vibrant culture and so many people are doing interesting things. It





**Corin Stiggall**

was almost like being over-privileged."

Scheinin's family added to his creative wealth. His father, Rich Scheinin, is a music writer for the San Jose Mercury News. His mother, Sara Solovitch, is a pianist, journalist, and author whose book about stage fright, "Playing Scared," will be released in June. His brother Max is a classical violinist who also plays with singer-songwriter Nick Perry in Head Womb. (Max also plays jazz, gypsy, and folk music). And his other brother, Dennis, "used to play the flute but quit."

Scheinin teaches after-school programs in New York public schools. His students are kindergarteners through second-graders.

"I enjoy working with kindergarteners," he said. "You learn so much about creativity by teaching kids that age because they are so creative. So you have to find creative ways to reach them and figure out how to use their intuitive skills."

Check [jessescheinin.com](http://jessescheinin.com) for Bay Area performances this summer.

### **Ben Flocks**

Ben Flocks' debut album, "Battle Mountain," has gotten rave reviews. Its soulful and sometimes gritty blend of jazz, blues, folk, and Americana evokes the lushly varied Bonny Doon landscape where he first picked up a saxophone.

"When the music program started at Bonny Doon Elementary School all my friends said, 'Hey you should sign up for the saxophone,'" 25-year-old Flocks recalled. "I didn't know much about music at the time but I did some research and it looked like a cool instrument, so I signed up for it. But when I got to the first day of music class, all my friends had signed up for drums and I was the only one on the saxophone. I was really angry because

they were all in the back of the class playing with their drum pads and talking, and it was just me up in the front with the band director."

A few years later, Flocks was in the music program at Pacific Collegiate School and he got excited about playing.

"I went to see Joshua Redman at Kuumbwa," Flocks recalled. "I had never heard the saxophone played like that before. I was blown away. You get to be really close and go backstage afterwards and meet them. I had so much fun that first show that throughout my years of high school I went to Kuumbwa almost every Monday night. We were really lucky to have had that growing up. I could learn how to play the music through going to these shows."

He did learn. And a few years later, Flocks got to play in Redman's trio. Like most other Santa Cruz jazz stars, he credits much of his success to studying with Ray Brown.

"To be around him was not only inspiring, it was cutthroat," Flocks said. "If you didn't practice your scales, or put the time in to learn the songs, or if you didn't love music, you weren't going to make it with him. He was hard on you. But the music he showed us and the way he taught us made me love it."

Flocks' family also was an important factor. His dad, attorney Reed Flocks, is not a musician but he had a massive vinyl record collection. His mom, Lisa, played a little bit of piano and sang a little.

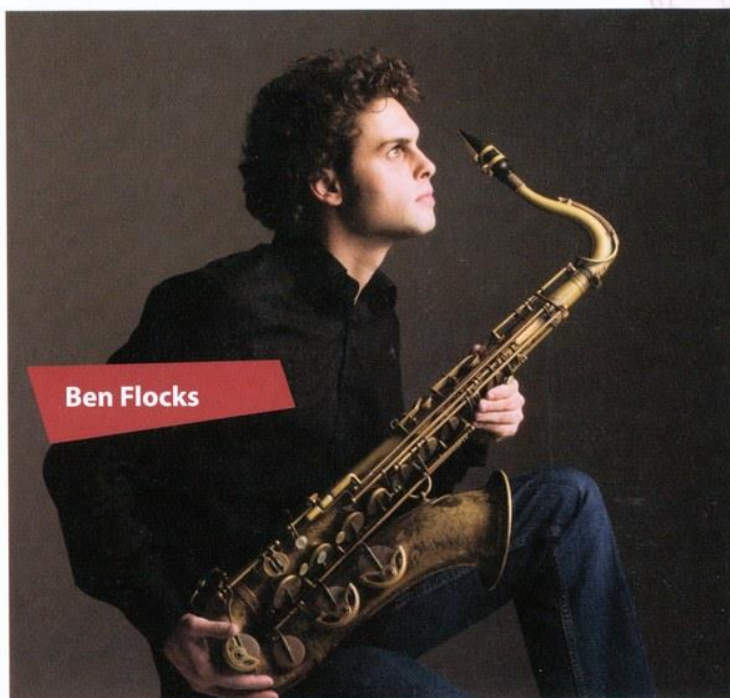
"They're not musicians," Flocks said, "but they have a great appreciation for music. I discovered my love of music indirectly through them."

After high school, Flocks was chosen to be a fellow at the Brubeck Institute, where he played with piano legend Dave Brubeck and performed extensively in the U.S. and abroad. He then went to New York, took lessons from Donny McCaslin, and studied at the New School. A month before graduation, he opened for piano star Ahmad Jamal at the Bern Jazz Festival in Switzerland.

Like the other uber-talented Santa Cruz jazz exports who were so generously mentored along the way, Flocks now devotes part of his time to sharing his knowledge. He teaches at the Calhoun School and the Stanford Jazz Workshop.

"It's important," he said. "My love for performing and my love for teaching are equal. I learn as much in the classroom as I do on the bandstand."

Ben Flocks will perform at the Stanford Jazz Festival (July 19-31). Check [benflocks.com](http://benflocks.com) for other Bay Area dates. 🎷



**Ben Flocks**

Photo: © Corin Stiggall

Photo: r.r. Jones