

Songs for Ana

After enduring an
inconceivable tragedy,
saxophonist and composer
JIMMY GREENE
strives to heal through
God, family and jazz

From the time he graduated from Connecticut's Hartt School in 1997, saxophonist Jimmy Greene's life seemed charmed beyond the dreams of jazz musicians. His gifts began with his sound, which won him instant attention. "He has that big tone of a real tenor, all but lost today," says the jazz flutist Red Sullivan. "Think Arnett Cobb, Illinois Jacquet." Jackie McLean had mentored him in his teens; thereafter Greene was snapped up by Horace Silver, Freddie Hubbard, Lewis Nash and Harry Connick Jr. At 24, he made his major-label debut as a leader.

Amid touring the world, he married his high school sweetheart, and they started an idyllic home life, complete with two beautiful children. By grade school age, Isaiah showed true promise at the piano. Pretty Ana brimmed with vitality; she loved to dance and sing, showered her family with love, and trusted the Biblical teachings that guided them all.

Then, just days before Christmas of 2012, Ana was gone at age 6—murdered, along with 25 others, in the massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn. Adam Lanza, a reclusive 20-year-old local with a history of mental health problems, had gone there with a semiautomatic rifle, among other guns, and opened fire after shooting and killing his mother at their home. Why he exploded as he did has been analyzed endlessly; following the attacks, Lanza committed suicide.

For Greene, there was no explaining or justifying what had occurred. His whole life seemed shattered; even his staunch Christian faith couldn't supply many answers. Interviewers had always focused on his music; now the tragedy overshadowed everything. Since then, Greene has had to shoulder devastating loss, comfort his family and find ways to keep Ana's spirit alive, all the while somehow pressing forward musically.

Greene's new album, his ninth, addresses all those concerns. *Beautiful Life*, released on the Mack Avenue label, is a memorial portrait of Ana and a scrapbook of her father's world in happier times. Colleagues of his appear: guitarist Pat Metheny, pianists Renee Rosnes and Cyrus Chestnut, singer-songwriter Javier Colon. So do pianist Kenny Barron, bassist Christian McBride and drummer Lewis Nash, who accompanied Greene during the semifinals of the Thelonious Monk International Jazz Saxophone Competition in 1996. (Greene earned second place in the finals.) Barron solos on a song Ana loved to sing, "Maybe," from her favorite musical, *Annie*. Greene's boyhood friend Anika Noni Rose—a Tony Award-winning actress and singer and the voice of the princess in one of Ana's favorite films, Disney's *The Princess and the Frog*—reads a monologue he wrote about children and the future. Ana's onetime school choir joins in. The child herself, accompanied by

Isaiah, sings the Christian hymn "Come, Thou Almighty King" in a homemade recording.

For Greene, now 39, life, by necessity, has gone on. His playing career thrives; he continues to work as Assistant Professor of Music and Assistant Coordinator of Jazz Studies at Western Connecticut State University in Danbury. But nothing may ever seem "normal" again. "I've had conversations with people who haven't wanted to ask questions about how I'm doing or how my family's doing, because they don't want to bring it up," he says. "My response has always been, my daughter and my pain are on my mind 24/7. It's not a question of bringing it up. It's always up."

Maybe to help achieve acceptance, Greene has talked a lot to the media. Near the one-year anniversary of the tragedy, Greene went on *CBS This Morning* and read a letter he wrote to himself, a recounting of his life and a look ahead to the clarity he hopes to find. "God will always make the way for you," he said. "Your faith in Him, especially in times of trouble, will give you peace beyond understanding."

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FOR YEARS, GREENE had reaped the rewards of talent, ambition and a well-brought-up man's commitment to doing the right thing. He was born in New Britain, Conn., in 1975, and his family later

BY JAMES GAVIN

► Jimmy Greene and daughter Ana in March 2011, just a few weeks shy of her 5th birthday



moved to Bloomfield, a largely African-American suburb of Hartford. He grew up with abundant advantages. His father, James Greene Sr., was a music-loving businessman who dabbled in songwriting and producing; he gave the 6-year-old Jimmy his first sax. The boy proved innately gifted, and his entire family cheered him on. Jimmy gravitated toward three albums in his father's collection: Coleman Hawkins' *The Hawk Flies High*, Cannonball Adderley's *Domination* and Gerry Mulligan's *The Arranger*. They ingrained in his head a classic, earthy saxophone sound with an old-school soulfulness.

Greene attended Bloomfield High School, where a creative arts program linked promising students with outside instructors. In 1990, a teacher arranged for Greene to meet Hartford County's resident bebop legend. Along with his wife, Dollie, saxophonist Jackie McLean had founded the Artists Collective, a Hartford-based performing arts school and cultural center. His fiendish heroin habit long behind him, McLean had found his mature calling as a fatherly mentor to new generations in jazz.

On a November day, Greene entered the schoolhouse headquarters of the Artists Collective. He heard McLean's saxophone resounding from a second-floor classroom. "I saw this long, lanky boy," Dollie says. Greene played for him, and McLean gave the 15-year-old a saxophone exercise to master. "Young people that he would give that to, he'd usually hear back from in five or six weeks," explains Dollie. "Jimmy called him in about a week and said, 'Oh, Mr. McLean, I have that exercise.' Jackie said, 'Are you sure? Because I don't want to waste my time.'" They met again. That night, Dollie says, "Jackie came home and said to me, 'He's got that baby under his fingers.'"

McLean told him he would have to decide between saxophone and his other love, basketball. The choice was easy. "When I met Jackie that was the force, that was the tunnel," says Greene. "I could see the goal in the distance; I could see how I was gonna get there. Whereas before I knew I loved music but I really didn't have much direction."

From then on, he says, McLean became "a mentor in every sense of the word. He asked me questions about my life and my family. He invited me to his home several times." Greene soaked up McLean's artistry one-to-one. "If you were in a room with him when he played, it was powerful, sometimes

overpowering. He was able to communicate so much feeling. The rhythm was so deep and well defined. He was one of the torchbearers of the bebop era, but he was always adapting; he was always interested in how younger musicians were developing."

Most of them were gestating not in the gritty dives of McLean's day but in conservatory settings—a shift that had begun to fill jazz with polished but academic players. The older guard saw Greene as a precious link to the past. His professor at the Collective, trombonist Steve Davis, just eight years his senior, began using Greene on his own gigs. "He was 17 and he was already playing great," says Davis. "His ability to

nized racing through fast tempos, but he also relaxed into ballad standards and let an intriguing personality shine through."

Greene had arrived at the tail end of a time when both major and indie labels were signing scores of young jazz musicians, hopeful of anything from decent sales to launching a star. Criss Cross had already released his first album as a leader, *Introducing Jimmy Greene*; in 2000, he graduated to RCA Victor with *Brand New World*, another CD of accessible, melodic, swinging postbop and wistful ballad playing. One more royal proclamation came from the *Times*: Greene, wrote Ratliff, had zoomed into "a central position among the new generation of mainstream jazz players."

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blend and phrase was way beyond his years, and he was already swinging hard, playing sophisticated harmonic language and had a soulful feel for the blues. But most impressive was Jimmy's demeanor. He always had a calmness about him and was a very kind, humble, thoughtful guy."

Greene moved on to his own institutionalized musical study at the University of Hartford's Hart School. But on weekends he trekked to the South End of Boston for on-the-job training in the house band of Wally's Cafe, a tiny, crowded, no-cover jazz dive, open since 1947. There, alongside Berklee students such as trumpeter Jeremy Pelt and visiting guests like Kenny Garrett and Chick Corea, Greene got a taste of how McLean had come to be.

After graduation he moved to New York, where he sealed his golden-boy status. Before he had even released an album, Jazz Standard booked him for Christmas week of 1997. The *New York Times* announced: "A Club Takes a Risk on a Fiery Sax Player." Critic Ben Ratliff praised "the breathy voluptuousness" of Greene's tone, and a lot more. "He's in command of harmony," Ratliff wrote, "and can sound very orga-

The Jimmy Greene Quartet began getting international bookings. Career firmly in place, he married Nelba Márquez, a petite, Puerto Rican family and marriage therapist. By 2006 they had two children, and Greene knew he had to think about getting off the road and settling down. "I'm not saying it was easy to do. But my parents had done the best by me, and I thought, you know, it's my turn. When you're performing and touring and busy, you miss a lot of milestones in your family. I wanted to be around for more of them."

In 2009, Greene accepted a teaching post at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg, Canada. He and his family lived there for three years, until an offer from Western Connecticut State University brought them back to his home state. They settled in Newtown, where the couple enrolled Ana and Isaiah in Sandy Hook Elementary School.

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ON DEC. 14, 2012, Greene was teaching when he got a frantic call from his wife, telling him a gunman had invaded Sandy Hook. Greene sped home; neither he nor

Nelba knew if their children were safe. Parents congregated at a local firehouse to wait for news. Isaiah's classroom was some distance from the scene of the crime; although he had heard the shots, the boy escaped harm. Ana, however, was gone.

The news plunged Greene and his family into a living nightmare. "We are Christians," he explains. "Naturally we questioned God: 'Why could you allow this to happen? Why me? Why Ana? What did she ever do to anybody? Why is our family being put through this? Why did our daughter have to suffer this? Why her classroom? Why her school?'"

More than 10 thousand messages of consolation flooded in. They helped, to a degree. "When there's a tragedy you need to feel surrounded," says Greene. "I don't know if we would have made it out of those initial horrible stages of grief and shock and confusion and anger if we didn't have all the support that we had. My dad said to me, 'Despite the immensity of your grief, understand that you also have a lot of beautiful things around you, and that will continue to be.' That got me started on expressing myself again through music."

Remarkable as it seems, he resumed performing about six weeks later, when he honored a commitment to play on The Jazz Cruise 2013. How did it feel? "Difficult," Greene says. "It was difficult to do anything in those days. But I knew that I needed to get back to some sort of routine."

Soon thereafter came a surprise message from Norman Chesky, cofounder (with his brother David) of the audiophile jazz label Chesky Records. Norman, whom Greene had never met, wanted him to make an album. "Initially I was a bit guarded," says the saxophonist. "Keep in mind that during that time we got a lot of communication from people who wanted to exploit our tragedy for this reason or that."

But Norman wasn't among them. The Cheskys owned an audiophile download service, HDtracks; it carried Greene's

album *Mission Statement*. Norman offered to finance and produce a new CD whenever Greene felt ready, and to let him own the master—"provided that a portion of the proceeds benefit charities in my daughter's memory. I couldn't believe that someone could be so thoughtful and generous." As beneficiaries, Greene chose the Artists Collective and his wife's startup



MICHELLE WATT

organization, the Ana Grace Project of Klingberg Family Centers, initiated "to promote love, community, and connection for every child and family through partnerships with schools, mental health providers, community organizations, and faith leaders."

With that, he began the healing process of translating Ana's spirit into music. *Beautiful Life* has a childlike gentleness about it, from the dulcet voices of the Linden Christian School Early Years Choir to the lullaby

quality of "Where Is Love?," a ballad from the musical *Oliver*. Greene plays it in quiet duo with Kenny Barron. On the saxophonist's composition "Little Voices," Anika Noni Rose voices a plea to protect the children of tomorrow. "Will you do all you can to love, to forgive, to include, to help?" she asks.

But has Greene himself managed to forgive? "That's a process I'm working on daily," he says. "What this person did to my family and to so many other families—it's an incredibly hard pill to swallow. But the Bible tells us, 'Forgive lest ye not be forgiven.' Carrying anger and bitterness and hatred fuels the fire for other ugly situations to happen."

A more concrete remedy, of course, would involve stricter gun-control laws—an issue that became a national debate after Sandy Hook, and one that grows more heated with each new gun-related casualty. Asked his opinion, Greene at first declined to comment. A few days later, he emailed the following statement: "While I support the rights afforded by our nation's constitution to gun owners, I believe that those rights are accompanied by very sober responsibilities. My wife and I have been active in advocating for common-sense solutions to end gun violence. I believe that requiring background checks for all gun sales and limiting magazine capacity will save countless lives."

None of this carefully weighted reasoning, of course, can go far in lightening his heart. For that,

Greene turns back to the Bible and thinks wishfully. "It comes down to 'Love your neighbor, love yourself.' If we love ourselves and love our neighbor, we can't hurt each other." As for himself and his family, Greene is leaning just as heavily on faith to see them through. "Ana's life on earth may be over," he explains, "but her soul is in glory right now. We have the great hope of joining her one day. That doesn't necessarily make the day-to-day easier, but we know that this life isn't the end." **JT**