

## Sarah Bernstein Quartet - Still / Free (2016)

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01. *Still / Free* 8:17 02. *Paper Eyes* 5:32 03. *Cede* 7:52 04. *Nightmorning* 7:18 05. *4=* 12:36 06. *Jazz Camp* 10:13 07. *Wind Chime* 3:55 Sarah Bernstein - violin Kris Davis - piano Stuart Popejoy - electric bass Ches Smith - drums

There's something bold in the first part of *Still/Free*, violinist Sarah Bernstein's debut quartet album, released earlier this year by Leo Records. This boldness isn't arrived at by the more common and obvious method of all-out technical bombast but rather by sustained quiet control and a sense of patience bespeaking true confidence. That is to say, if the eponymous opener introduces an introspective world of unhurried arpeggios, rich hesitations, and gradual repetition, it is not out of timidity but out of masterful restraint.

In following this first track with a second quiet meditation ("Paper Eyes," a ballad), Bernstein ups the ante, challenging listeners to stick with her while she puts off showcasing dynamic range to continue building a relatively "still" atmosphere. Of course with such a stellar group of musicians at her disposal—Kris Davis on piano, Stuart Popejoy on electric bass, and Ches Smith on drums—this is no real risk on Bernstein's part, or chore on the listener's. Bernstein herself as leader and composer gets much of the spotlight throughout the album, but not an inordinate amount—as expected, any of Kris Davis's solo is worthy of highlight-status. And it's to the rhythm section's credit that they understand when to hang back, playing for the tune and in support of their band mates.

None of which is to suggest that the quartet as a whole doesn't know how and when to show off its full capacity. After a head in the style of "Syeeda's Song Flute," "Cede" sets off on some compelling uptempo swing; where Bernstein's solo makes thoughtful use of space, Davis's grows by degrees, bringing Smith along with her cymbal crashes and rim shots and all. Popejoy takes a fluid and lyrical solo to lead the tune into a final rollicking pass over the theme. Track

five, “4=,” begins with a repetitive gesture that loosens into a passage of group improvisation showcasing not only Bernstein and Davis’s individual talents but also their impressive interplay. But this is only the beginning: after four minutes, the quartet comes together for a kinked melody, which in turn sets up a more traditional series of solos over a funky ostinato/groove. In the predictable but effective pattern, Bernstein solos, then Davis—but Smith’s follow-up turn is a special treat, more musical than technical but still affording a welcome opportunity to catch the drummer’s chops in action.

If “4=” isn’t the album’s centerpiece, the 10-minute “Jazz Camp” may be. This piece combines all the best elements of the others—solos from Bernstein, Davis, and Smith; sensitive interaction between everyone; and incessant, hypnotic repetition. But even in this penultimate track Bernstein introduces new elements: eerily processed violin drones to haunt the tight 5/4 ostinato, as well as snippets of poetry radioed in during planned pauses. Still/Free has traveled a great distance from its opening meditations, but it’s not quite done: “Wind Chime,” with its gentle storm of pizzicato violin, tinkling piano, and blustery cymbals, provides the album a beautiful closing note. ---Eric McDowell, [freejazzblog.org](http://freejazzblog.org)

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