

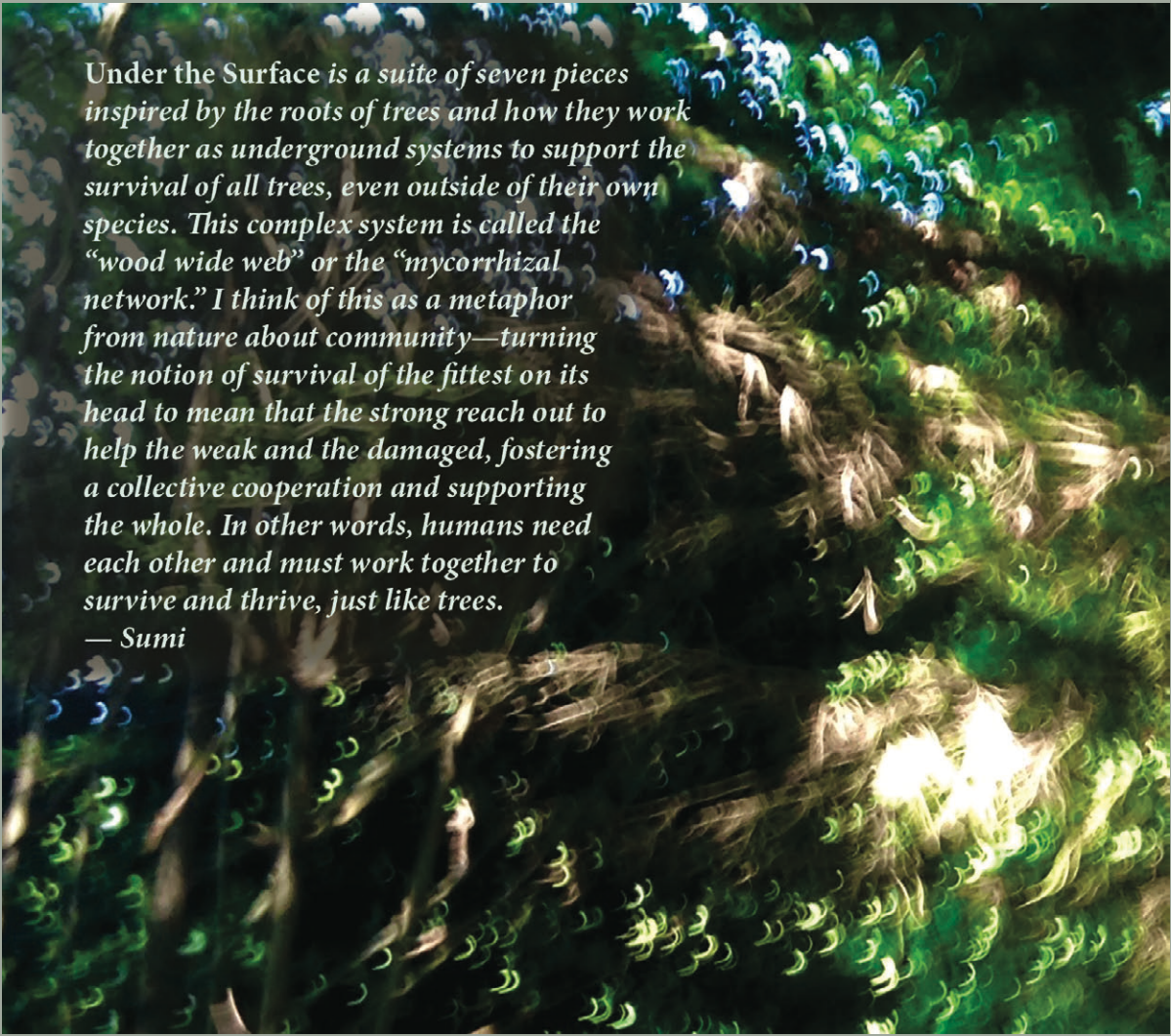
The background of the entire image is an abstract, artistic composition. It features a dark, almost black, field filled with intricate, swirling patterns of light. These patterns are primarily in shades of vibrant green and bright yellow, giving the impression of light reflecting off water or perhaps ethereal smoke. The light patterns are concentrated in the lower half of the image, where they form a bright, glowing area that fades into the darker upper half. The overall effect is one of depth and movement, as if the viewer is looking into a vast, mysterious space.

# Alchemy Sound Project

performs the music of

## Sumi Tonooka


# Under the Surface



*Under the Surface is a suite of seven pieces inspired by the roots of trees and how they work together as underground systems to support the survival of all trees, even outside of their own species. This complex system is called the “wood wide web” or the “mycorrhizal network.” I think of this as a metaphor from nature about community—turning the notion of survival of the fittest on its head to mean that the strong reach out to help the weak and the damaged, fostering a collective cooperation and supporting the whole. In other words, humans need each other and must work together to survive and thrive, just like trees.*

*— Sumi*






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Brendan McGeehan at Elm Street Studios,  
Conshohocken PA  
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and John O. Senior  
Produced by Sumi Tonooka  
Photography and Graphic Design by Sumi Tonooka  
and John O. Senior

#### SPECIAL THANKS

To all of the Alchemy Sound Project musicians and special guest Johnathan Blake—this work would not be the same without you, and I am so grateful for your remarkable talents!!!

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Brendan McGeehan, John O. Senior, Nancy Kimmons, Erica Lindsay, Lise Yasui, Alison Loeke, Ken Lindsay, Edwin Outwater, and Hank Mou

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- |                        |       |
|------------------------|-------|
| 1. Points of Departure | 6:30  |
| 2. Savour              | 8:56  |
| 3. Interval Haiku      | 10:56 |
| 4. Tear Bright         | 7:04  |
| 5. Mother Tongue       | 8:07  |
| 6. For Stanley         | 8:39  |
| 7. Under the Surface   | 7:47  |

All Compositions by Sumi Tonooka SESAC 2022

Sumi Tonooka – Piano  
Gregg August – Bass  
Johnathan Blake – Drums  
Erica Lindsay – Tenor Saxophone  
Samantha Boshnack – Trumpet  
Michael Ventoso – Trombone  
Salim Washington – Tenor Saxophone,  
Bass Clarinet, Flute



*Under the Surface* by Sumi Tonooka has been made possible with support from Chamber Music America's New Jazz Works program funded through the generosity of the Doris Duke Foundation

[www.alchemysoundproject.com](http://www.alchemysoundproject.com)

[www.sumitonooka.com](http://www.sumitonooka.com)

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## From Sumi – About the Music

### Points of Departure

The opening piece is inspired by the living, divine network of underground root systems—hidden yet vital. The trio creates an open, fluid dialogue: Johnathan Blake's drumming embodies the pulse and vitality of the mission; Gregg August anchors the ensemble with a bass line that evokes the depth of the roots; and the piano melody drifts above like leaves, suspended in air and light.

### Savour

This composition is a joyful meditation on mindfulness and the humor needed to truly savor life. It celebrates a sense of friendliness and the nurturing impulse found in both nature and human beings. Highlights include Michael Ventoso's playful opening trombone solo on plunger—a nod to Bubber Miley and the Ellington tradition—and Erica Lindsay's warm, swinging, and agile tenor saxophone, especially her lively exchange with Johnathan Blake.

### Interval Haiku

Structured like a musical haiku, this piece uses intervals to shape a unique sonic architecture. It opens with a through-composed meditation—at once reflective and restless—with arco bass counterpoint and layered ensemble harmonies. A medium up-tempo piano solo follows, leading into Samantha Boshnack's tart, exploratory trumpet solo. Salim Washington introduces new harmonic changes with a tenor saxophone solo that is daring, mature, and personal. Gregg August then takes a virtuosic and transcendent arco solo, with concise introductory pizzicato passages, before the composition returns to a variation of the opening theme to close.

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### Tear Bright

This piece was inspired by the duality of pain and beauty—seen through the lens of a single tear. Composed during the COVID pandemic, it reflects sorrow and tribute to all the lives lost including the passing of many musicians. But it also honors the resilience of communities, rallying together to survive—like the unseen support systems of trees. The music begins with a free-form piano solo and features a sensitive and thoughtful solo by Michael Ventoso on trombone and an emotionally evocative solo by Salim Washington on bass clarinet.

### Mother Tongue

Inspired by the “Mother Tree” and the power of the divine feminine, this composition holds both tension and exuberance. The bass line roots the piece like a rhythmic dance with nature, while the melody bursts forward—syncopated, unpredictable, alive. Johnathan Blake delivers an electrifying drum solo, followed by Erica Lindsay's deep, sinuous tenor saxophone. Their duet transitions into a regal and haunting trumpet solo by Samantha Boshnack, continuing the spirited dialogue with Blake, whose drums enliven every corner of this recording.

### For Stanley

This trio piece is dedicated to the late pianist and composer Stanley Cowell, my teacher and mentor during my early twenties. We lost him during COVID to an unrelated illness. Stanley was a visionary artist, and his *Ancestral Streams* recording on Strata-East remains deeply influential—two of my personal favorites from this recording are *Equipoise* and the kalimba driven, *Travelin' Man*. His legacy as a brilliant composer, innovative pianist, and original voice in jazz continues to inspire. He was both a pillar of the jazz community and a beloved part of my musical family.

### Under the Surface

The album's title track explores layered modal harmonies and a recurring, playful mantra-like piano figure. The music moves between bright and shadowed colors, evoking a sense of ritual and sonic healing. Salim Washington offers a witty and inspired tenor saxophone solo, followed by a fierce, conversational drum solo from Johnathan Blake. The piece culminates in a free, collective improvisation—an ecstatic moment of ensemble unity—before arriving triumphantly at the end. *(I wish we had let that final free section go just a little longer.)*



# ALCHEMY SOUND PROJECT



## BAND MEMBERS

(left to right) Sumi Tonooka - piano; Erica Lindsay - tenor saxophone; Samantha Boshnack - trumpet; Michael Ventoso - trombone; Gregg August - bass; Salim Washington - multi reeds, bass clarinet, flute and tenor saxophone; Johnathan Blake - drums.



Sumi Tonooka



Erica Lindsay



Samantha Boshnack



Salim Washington



Gregg August



Johnathan Blake



Michael Ventoso



## Photo Gallery: Behind the Scenes



Alchemy Sound Project Premieres *Under The Surface* at the Painted Bride in Philadelphia, November 2023.



Alchemy Sound Project in the elevator at SFJAZZ! November 2023



Alchemy Sound Project gave two master classes while on their West Coast tour in 2023. Here at a elementary school in Oakland with the exceptional Angela Wellman, teacher Randy Porter — thank you Rebecca Mauleon for the photo!



At UCLA School of Music Master Class, November 2023



## Photo Gallery – continued



In the Green Room at SF Jazz



In SF on a well deserved break



With the trees in Seattle, Washington



Alternate view of first gig at SFJazz

## RELEASE NOTES for *UNDER THE SURFACE* – by Andy Gilbert

Pianist/composer Sumi Tonooka reveals the secret world of trees and the underground connections that bind society in the breathtaking suite *Under the Surface*, a Chamber Music America New Jazz Works commission. The album is built on Tonooka's trio with Gregg August and Johnathan Blake and features the Alchemy Sound Project.

Sumi Tonooka looks for the submerged truths and unseen networks that nourish our world. The renowned Philadelphia composer and pianist has been most visible in recent years writing commissions for symphony orchestras and crafting new works for her trio. With *Under the Surface*, various Tonookian worlds converge in an extended work that embodies the interlaced web of connections that manifest beneath our feet and on neighborhood bandstands.

A suite inspired by the roots of trees and the fungi-supported mycorrhizal network that allows them to support the survival of all nearby trees (even outside of their own species), *Under the Surface* is built on Tonooka's volatile trio with supremely versatile bassist Gregg August and special guest drum star Johnathan Blake, who also hails from Philadelphia. In giving shape to Tonooka's compositions, Blake embodies the album's concept as he's both the music's engine and "part of my personal musical family and network," Tonooka says.

"For 30-plus years I played with his father, the great jazz violinist John Blake, and I knew Johnathan as a boy." Now, he's one of the premier drummers of his generation "and firmly holds the baton or mycorrhizal energy to pass off to the next generations," she says.

While Tonooka's mycorrhizal concept might sound esoteric, it couldn't be more grounded. The music flows from the essential web of relationships that allow musicians to connect, flourish and improvise together. Composed during the early months of COVID with the support of a Chamber Music America New Jazz Works grant, the suite took shape as both a tribute to and reflection on the way people reached out to help each other through the crisis.

Writing for the Alchemy Sound Project, a diverse multi-generational collective that's served as a sonic laboratory in recent years, Tonooka took care to highlight the particular gifts of her collaborators: tenor saxophonist Erica Lindsay, trumpeter Samantha Boshnack, trombonist Michael Ventoso, and Salim Washington on tenor sax, bass clarinet, and flute.

The album opens with the trio on "Points Of Departure," a joy ride that immediately establishes Blake's textural command and Tonooka's adventurous spirit. She credits her recent work in groups led by pianist and Philly mainstay Bobby Zankel, an improviser deeply shaped by years under the wing of Cecil Taylor, with honing her skills in unstructured settings. "There's no chart in terms of the chords," she says. "We play a theme and just start to go."

With Ventoso's extended wah-wah opening, "Savour" brings to mind an Ellingtonian rhapsody. The multi-section piece features a long trio passage marked by beautifully calibrated dynamics, and the kinetic interplay between Blake and Lindsay's poised tenor. At 11 minutes, the suite's centerpiece and longest movement, "Interval Haiku," opens with a dissonant, unhurried fanfare featuring the horns that soon gives way to a briskly swinging piano trio passage. Before long we're back in the woods with a series of solos, led by Boshnack's expressive trumpet. Thick with wide intervallic movement, these woods are deep, inviting and mysterious.

The action slows to a sensuous saunter with the lapidary ballad "Tear Bright," which moves from Ventoso's wending trombone solo to Washington's lustrous bass clarinet passage. With "Mother Tongue," the sylvan idyll turns frantic, as the dense mid-tempo piece feels like a trap the musicians seek to navigate. A thicket of melodic lines driven by August's Latin-powered bass converge as Washington's flute soars above and Ventoso's trombone searches the soil. There's no mincing of words in the intricacies of "Mother Tongue," but with "For Stanley," Tonooka offers a simple, heartfelt love letter to the late piano great Stanley Cowell, who died while she was composing the suite.



She was in her early 20s when she got a grant to study with him, and he became an important mentor. “I loved his music, and he introduced me to Akira Tana, because he was playing with the Heath Brothers with Akira,” she said, referring to the great drummer with whom she recorded her first two albums. “He had many musical identities. The last time I saw him was a concert I did with John Blake, and I wanted to honor him and his influence on me.”

The suite closes with the title movement, the brisk, inviting and often witty “Under The Surface.” A duo passage between Blake and Washington concludes with a reference to the “Girl From Ipanema,” a cheeky quote that takes us back to the origin of all life, the sea.

In many ways the path to *Under the Surface* runs through Tonooka’s involvement in the Jazz Composers Orchestra Institute (JCOI), a program designed to foster connections between jazz artists and symphony orchestras. Encouraged to apply by Lindsay, who’d participated in the JCOI’s inaugural 2012 session, Tonooka thrived in the program. She was one of a few JCOI composers whose work was selected for a premiere, which led to the American Composers Orchestra presenting her piece “Full Circle” in New York City.

Alchemy Sound Project coalesced during her JCOI residency at UCLA, where she connected with players such as Detroit-reared Salim Washington, a commanding multi-instrumental improviser who has since become chair of global jazz studies at the UCLA Herb Alpert School of Music. Tonooka recruited Lindsay, with whom she was already co-leading a quartet that records for the label they co-founded, Artists Recording Collective (ARC). An artist-in-residence at Bard College, Lindsay had mentored JCOI participants Michael Ventoso and Samantha Boshnack, who herself leads several notable ensembles on Seattle’s creatively charged jazz scene.

The idea for Alchemy Sound Project came to Tonooka in the midst of the Jazz Composers Orchestra Institute residency “hanging out with the other composers during our free time,” she said. “I was thinking, what if we wrote for each other and learned and performed each other’s music? The idea was to give ourselves a community, even a small one, to develop our own work.”

Tonooka’s jazz education took place mostly on the bandstand. By age 17, she was writing prolifically for a trio she was leading around Philadelphia featuring future bass star Jamaaladeen Tacuma. Drum legend Philly Joe Jones was so impressed he recruited her for a two-year stint in his band.

Moving to New York City in 1983, Tonooka gained considerable attention as a major new voice, eventually making her recording debut as a leader on 1990’s *With An Open Heart*, a trio session with Akira Tana and bassist Rufus Reid. Before she started down the orchestral path, Tonooka had also composed scores for about 20 films.

One reason that *Under the Surface* sounds so cohesive is that Alchemy Sound Project honed the music during its first tour in 2023. As she says with a wink, after all the orchestral writing, touring and recording the suite represents “a return to my roots.”

“This record is a good representation of a lot of what I’ve learned in the past 10 years, exploring orchestration and 20th century music,” she says. It also embodies an alternative vision for social cohesion, a “wood wide web” that takes the mycorrhizal metaphor from nature and applies it to human endeavors, “turning the notion of survival of the fittest on its head to mean that the strong reach out to help the weak and the damaged, fostering a collective cooperation and supporting the whole,” Tonooka says. “In other words, humans need each other and must work together to survive and thrive, just like trees.”

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