

The Bay Area pianist Myra Melford—whom the *New Yorker* called “a stalwart of the new-jazz movement”—has spent the last three decades making brilliant original music that is equally challenging and engaging. Over the years, and inspired by extramusical sources like literature, history and spirituality, she’s explored an array of formats, from ruminative solo-piano recitals to deeply interactive small groups, ambitious multidisciplinary programs and even the swinging grandeur of the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra. Her most recent release, *The Other Side of Air* (Firehouse 12), by her quintet Snowy Egret, is an ideal place to begin digging into her dynamic catalog. Featuring the extraordinary lineup of Melford, cornetist Ron Miles, guitarist Liberty Ellman, bass guitarist Stomu Takeishi and drummer (and MacArthur Fellow) Tyshawn Sorey, the music offers hard-angled counterpoint, potent grooves, free exploration, intuitive interplay, chamber-music elements and much more.

That sort of idiom-bending ingenuity—which has garnered Melford fans from the worlds of jazz, contemporary classical and the avant-garde—has been a through line in her musical life. Born in 1957 and raised near Chicago, Melford’s early tutelage included both classical training and the Windy City blues and boogie-woogie she absorbed through her first piano teacher, Erwin Helfer. She became introduced to jazz during college, in Olympia, Washington, and later studied under Art Lande and Gary Peacock in Seattle before heading east, first to Boston and then to New York. Once immersed in the city that nurtured Cecil Taylor, Ornette Coleman and her other avant-jazz beacons, she began making her own vital contributions to the burgeoning Downtown scene. In these formative years she participated in a workshop with AACM hero Leroy Jenkins, studied piano with Jaki Byard and Don Pullen, took composition lessons from Henry Threadgill and began a decade-long tenure in ensembles led by “Conduction” innovator Butch Morris.

Since debuting on record as a bandleader in 1990, she’s accrued a discography containing more than 20 albums as a leader or co-leader and boasting collaborations with creative-music luminaries like Dave Douglas, Ben Goldberg, Chris Speed, Erik Friedlander, Cuong Vu and Marty Ehrlich. Her working groups have acted as both singular, self-contained units and larger statements of her always developing ideas about composition and improvisation. In her early trio with Lindsey Horner and Reggie Nicholson, Melford established a searching, democratic take on trio language that expanded in later groups like Equal Interest, with Jenkins and Joseph Jarman; Trio M, featuring Matt Wilson and Mark Dresser; and the freely improvising Tiger Trio, with Nicole Mitchell and Joëlle Léandre. Another triumvirate of fearless female improvisers, MZM, features Melford, Miya Masaoka and Zeena Parkins. A similarly all-embracing mission, based in writing that is at once intricate and receptive to the whims of the ensemble, has defined her quintets and sextets, including the Same River, Twice, Be Bread and now Snowy Egret.

Along the way, Melford has received some of the most prestigious honors in contemporary music, including numerous *DownBeat* poll placings, a 2012 Alpert Award in the Arts for Music and, in 2013, a Guggenheim Fellowship and the Doris Duke Performing Artist Award. That same year, she earned a Doris Duke Residency to Build Demand for the Arts, during which she facilitated forward-looking programming at San Francisco’s Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. A 2000 Fulbright scholarship allowed Melford to study in North India for nine months, a journey that informed the early music of Be Bread. In 2016, Snowy Egret was named Midsize Ensemble of the Year in the Jazz Journalists Association’s annual Jazz Awards.

An experienced educator as well, Melford relocated to the Bay Area from New York in 2004 to join the music department at the University of California, Berkeley. A Professor of Composition and Improvisational Practices for the Department of Music, she continues to bring cutting-edge jazz and new music to the campus community via her teaching and as a guest curator for the Cal Performances organization.