

JIMMY GREENE

FAITH IN ACTION

By Ken Micallef | Photo by Steven Sussman

Saxophonist Jimmy Greene knows a pain that no person should have to endure. Shortly after 9:30 a.m. on Dec. 14, 2012, a gunman shot his way through a glass panel next to the locked entrance doors of Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. He killed 20 children and six adult staff members. Among the dead were 6-and-a-half-year-old Ana Grace Márquez-Greene, the daughter of Greene and his wife, Nelba Márquez-Greene.

At the time of the shooting, Greene was at Western Connecticut State University at Danbury, where he is an assistant professor of music and assistant coordinator of jazz studies.

"I was at my office writing music when my wife called," Greene said. "We went to the Sandy Hook Volunteer Firehouse, which it is at the bottom of a long driveway that leads to the school. They had the driveway blocked off and had us all wait in the firehouse for further news."

Media coverage was extensive. As the victims were identified, news about Ana spread very quickly within the jazz community. Greene has found multiple ways to honor her.

"In her short life, Ana strengthened us with her loving, generous, joyful spirit," Greene wrote when founding the Ana Márquez-Greene Music Scholarship Fund at Western Connecticut State University. "She routinely committed selfless acts of kindness: Every drawing or craft project she began was envisioned not for her own enjoyment, but as a gift for another. She often left sweet notes that read, 'I love you Mom and Dad,' under our bedroom pillow—not on special occasions, but, rather, on ordinary days.

"Ana's love for singing was evident before she was even able to talk," he continued. "In a musical family her gift for melody, pitch and rhythm stood out remarkably. And she never walked anywhere—her mode of transportation was dance. She danced from room to room and place to place. She danced to all the music she heard, whether in the air or in her head. Ana loved her God, loved to

read the Bible and loved to sing and dance as acts of worship."

On the New York City jazz scene, Greene is admired for his expressive compositions, consummate musicianship and pure, beautiful tone on tenor and soprano saxophones. A precocious musician at age 6, by the time he was 15, he was studying with Jackie McLean. Greene was already working with prominent jazz artists in high school, and by college he was practically a veteran of Manhattan's storied jazz clubs. Greene's nine solo recordings, including *Live At Smalls* (SmallsLive), *Mission Statement* (RazDaz/Sunnyside), *The Overcomer's Suite* (Nu Jazz), *True Life Stories* (Criss Cross Jazz) and *Introducing Jimmy Greene* (Criss Cross Jazz), are stellar examples of jazz with purpose. Never one to use his enormous technical gifts for show, Greene, who epitomizes the phrase "gentle giant," possesses a subtle, deeply melodious writing style, his skills honed on the bandstands of such leaders as Freddie Hubbard, Horace Silver, Tom Harrell and Harry Connick Jr. The saxophonist appears on more than 70 albums as a sideman.

When the news of the Sandy Hook shooting was broadcast over the airwaves the response by Greene's many friends in the music community was immediate.

"Goodness," Greene proclaimed, "there were so many musicians reaching out to me. Many of them knew Ana. When I left the firehouse where they had us waiting all afternoon, there was a row of news' cameras outside. Within moments my

image was flashed on CNN. Lewis Nash contacted me from Japan. Harry Connick texted me and said, 'Can I come over?' He's a good friend. Harry wrote a song for Ana called 'Love Wins,' which we recorded in 2013. Harry released it and donated all the proceeds to my family. A dozen more songs were written by friends of mine. Just beautiful, touching gestures.

"I got a phone message from Mulgrew Miller a few months after my daughter was killed," he continued. "In his message there was a lot of support and condolence and encouragement, but what sticks with me the most was that he said, 'Jimmy, we need you out here.' This was a month before he passed." Withdrawing into the world of family and friends for consolation and to mourn, Jimmy eventually found his way back to music, where he would ultimately honor his daughter.

"For the weeks and months after my daughter was killed," Greene reflected, "our house was full of family and friends who were there to support us. My dad said, 'Jimmy, your grief will be with you for a while. But in the midst of your grief I want you to remember that there is a lot of beauty surrounding you right now. Don't let your grief blind you to that.' That was very profound for me. What I took from that is my wife and my son are still here. And all these people are here that love me. Spin that forward, there's a lot of music left in me."

A month passed after the death of his daughter. Greene didn't think of music, didn't touch his tenor.



Jimmy Greene at the Litchfield Jazz Festival
in Goshen, Connecticut, on Aug. 10

Jimmy Greene with his daughter, Ana



COURTESY OF ARTIST

"I was just trying to function," he said. "I was just trying to stand up. But I needed to get back to feeling like I had some sort of routine. So I started to pick up the instrument again and started to write music again. These songs were in there. That led to this album, *Beautiful Life*."

A generous offer by Chesky Records label president and co-owner Norman Chesky set Greene on track. Chesky wanted to pay for all

recording, engineering, mixing, mastering and administrative costs so Greene could focus on creating an album of music to honor his daughter.

"At first I couldn't believe what he was offering—it was so generous," Greene said. "Norman was going to do whatever it took to get the record made. All the mixing and mastering for his label is done in-house. Nicholas Prout, their engineer, has a studio inside Chesky's offices. Norman was instrumental in so many areas—from financing, setting up correspondence with labels to partner with to using the label's internal people to work on the project—and Chesky's administrative staff made the calls and booked the studios and musicians."

A portion of the proceeds from *Beautiful Life* (Mack Avenue) will be donated to The Ana Grace Project, which works to promote a sense of community and to prevent violence; and to another charity, The Artists Collective, which provides children with training in the arts.

"Music has an amazing way of expressing things that words can't," Greene said. "My daughter had a lot of great music in her. She had a lot of life and joy and faith and hope in her. She had a beautiful singing voice, and for a 6-year-old, really good pitch. She can't sing here anymore. But I can, through my music. While I am here, until I can see her again, that is what I'll do."

Though *Beautiful Life* could have easily turned into a requiem, it's rather, a peaceful, joy-filled and tranquil recording that is a mixture of straightforward jazz, church hymns, contemporary Christian music, three original songs fram-

ing Greene's lyrics, and touching reminisces in the form of home recordings of Ana singing and her brother Isaiah playing piano. It is truly a celebration of the life of Ana Grace Márquez-Greene.

The collaborators on *Beautiful Life* include guitarist Pat Metheny; vocalists Kurt Elling, Javier Colon and Latanya Farrell; spoken word from Tony Award-winning actress Anika Noni Rose; a 13-piece string ensemble from the Hartford Symphony Orchestra; the superb rhythm section of Renee Rosnes on piano, Christian McBride on bass and Lewis Nash on drums, augmented by pianists Kenny Barron and Cyrus Chestnut; as well as a children's choir drawn from the Winnepig grade school where Ana once attended classes.

Regarding her contribution, Rosnes noted, "Music has the power to heal, and it was a moving and cathartic experience to be a part of this special recording in tribute to Ana Grace. I think we were all there to honor Ana's life with truth and beauty. As a composer, Jimmy has a natural melodic gift and his music flows organically. I recall feeling very emotional when Kurt Elling began to sing the lyrics to 'Ana's Way.' The addition of the children's choir on that piece, further exalts the celebration of Ana's sweet spirit."

Did writing the music that became *Beautiful Life* help Jimmy to heal, if healing from such a tragedy is even possible?

"I will never be the same again," Greene said. "I will always have a hole in my heart and in my life and in my home, but I am thankful I am a musician because pouring your energy and effort and time into creating beauty and creating a con-

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nection with people is a wonderful way to live your life. I am thankful I have that to do every day. It helps me. I couldn't imagine not being a musician and not having an outlet to express the things that words can't. I am thankful for that."

Beautiful Life opens with a home recording of Ana singing the traditional "Saludos" ("Greetings") at a family Christmas celebration in Puerto Rico a year before her death. Jimmy segues to a section in which he and guitarist Pat Metheny perform "Come Thou Almighty King," the song closing with another family recording of Ana singing the hymn to her brother Isaiah's piano accompaniment.

Here, and throughout *Beautiful Life*, Greene's tenor tone is round, pure and stately, but also mournful. His tenor cries in "Come Thou Almighty King" strike the gut, followed by Metheny's leanly plaintive solo.

The swinging "Last Summer" is performed by the quartet of Greene, Rosnes, McBride and Nash, followed by Greene's "When I Come Home," sung by his former Hartt classmate and NBC's *The Voice* winner and new Concord signing Javier Colon, who sings Greene's lyrics: "The day my life is through, my heart will search for you through the skies."

"Ana's Way," another Greene original, is performed by Elling with the Linden Christian School Early Years Choir, consisting of Ana's former Winnipeg classmates. "Jimmy is a highly respected craftsman with a beautiful sound," Elling said. "And then that happened. Jimmy's personal commitment to joy, to compassion, to emotional survival, and the example that he set with his family and his personal faith in God has been really remarkable. He's an exemplary person. Just watching him pick his family up and put them on his shoulders and keep on walking—it's beautiful and, man—it's really moving to me."

The quartet performs Greene's "Your Great Name" to a Brazilian rhythm; next is "Where Is Love," originally taught to Greene by Jackie McLean at his first lesson. A jazz waltz, "Seven Candles," was written around the time of what would have been Ana's 7th birthday.

The penultimate track of *Beautiful Life*, titled "Prayer," is Greene's arrangement of the text of the "Lord's Prayer." As Chestnut accompanies Greene's tenor saxophone the familiar Christian prayer is recited by Farrell, whose potent contralto delighted Ana as a toddler. Ana became a fan of Anika Noni Rose after hearing her perform the role of Tiana in the 2009 animated film *The Princess and the Frog*, which she loved.

"I hope this album gives listeners a sense of who my little girl was," Greene explained. "And I hope they get a sense of who I am. Ultimately, I hope they get a greater sense of who I know God to be. God has shown himself faithful like he does every time. Why? That's a big question I have. I will probably never get that answer here on earth. But I do know that He is able to sustain me and bring us through this. And I shudder to think where I would be if I didn't have that assurance. Literally all that allows me to get up in the morning is that assurance."

In addition to his quartet and teaching schedule at Western Connecticut State University,

Greene leads a band with Rosnes, bassist John Patitucci and drummer Jeff "Tain" Watts. He also plays in bands led by Nash, Rosnes and pianist Bill Charlap. Along with weeklong dates at the Jazz Standard in New York and the Mid-Atlantic Jazz Festival in D.C. to debut *Beautiful Life*, Greene is developing a band comprised of former students (including bassist Luke Sellick and drummer Jimmy Macbride). Greene's concern for young people doesn't stop there.

"My wife and I have been very adamant about our support for common-sense solutions to gun laws [developed] with people from all walks of life who want our kids and communities to be safe,"

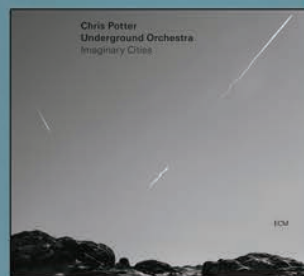
Greene said.

After speaking with Greene for a couple hours, it's impossible to not be moved, to feel deep respect for this man who is so poised, whose life was shattered, yet whose great faith and character provide an example for anyone who thinks they've seen hard times.

"As traumatized as my wife and I are," Greene said, "my son, Isaiah, was in the schoolhouse, he heard everything. And all his classmates did, too. Several of them lost their siblings. Considering all that he's been through, it's amazing how well our son is doing. That being said, it's going to be a day-to-day thing for us, and for the rest of our lives." **DB**

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