

Written by Charles Waring

Friday, 15 April 2016 12:58 - Last Updated Friday, 15 April 2016 13:25



After seven well-received albums released on a series of different indie labels (including his own Strick Music venture) between 2001 and 2011, Florida-born multi-reed man, **MARCUS STRICKLAND**

has landed his first major label deal, joining the roster of the prestigious Blue Note imprint. His debut album for the company is the curiously titled '

Nihil Novi

, his first long player in five years. Leading a fresh incarnation of his long-running Twi-Life band - comprising keyboardists Mitch Henry and Masayuki Hirano, trumpeter Keyon Harrold, bassist Kyle Miles, drummer Charles Haynes and singer,

Jean Baylor

- 37-year-old Strickland (who has an identical twin brother called E.J., who plays drums) has moved away from straight ahead jazz to arrive at an elusive, ineffable sound and style that defies categorization but which references hip-hop, soul and R&B as well as improvised instrumental music. "

I approached this record without thinking of genres

," explains the saxophonist. "

I'm tired of saying, 'yeah, it's music but it has a little hip-hop, a little soul and everything.' All these things come from the same source, which is the blues. So it's almost pointless to try and keep them separate. They're all meant to be mixed together anyway, so that's what's going to happen.

"

Written by Charles Waring

Friday, 15 April 2016 12:58 - Last Updated Friday, 15 April 2016 13:25

The album was produced by bassist/auteur **Meshell Ndegeocello** and features cameos by noted keyboardist **Robert**

Glasper

bassist

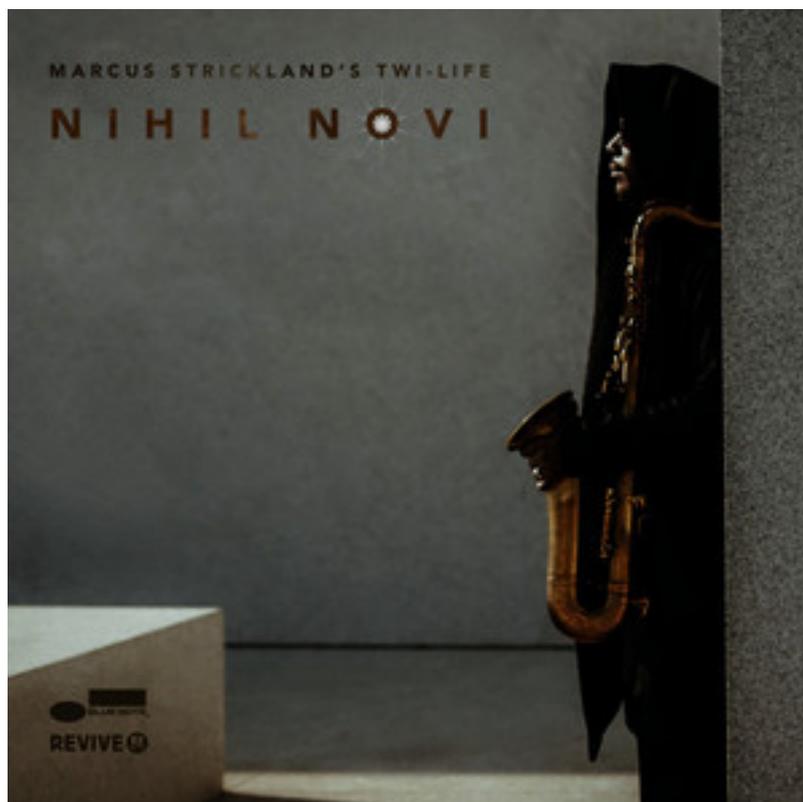
Pino Palladino

, and ubiquitous drummer,

Chris Dave

(who's played with everyone from Mint Condition, and Maxwell to Anderson Paak and Adele). The album is going to figure prominently in Strickland's set list when he and Twi-Life appear at the Cheltenham Jazz Festival in Gloucestershire, England on Sunday April 30th.

In an exclusive interview with SJF before his UK trip, Marcus Strickland talked to Charles Waring about his life in music...



Written by Charles Waring

Friday, 15 April 2016 12:58 - Last Updated Friday, 15 April 2016 13:25

Which musicians are you going to bring with you to the Cheltenham Jazz Festival later this month?

It will be Jean Baylor on vocals, Kyle Miles on electric bass, Chad Selph on organ/keys, and Charles Haynes on drums.

Is anyone there that you going to check out during the festival?

I'm definitely going to check out Hiatus Kaiyote because I think they're playing later the same night. That's definitely a priority because I love them.

How long has Twi-Life been going?

The band's been going for a while. Every time I do a Twi-Life record I think of it as starting from zero. Sometimes I'll just change up the whole personnel and that's what I did for this record but I've had the band since 2006. The personnel has interchanged a lot but I think I'm going to stay with this version for a while.

What sort of set will you play festival?

It's mainly going to be from the new album and there might be a few songs that I'm writing already for the second record

Where does the name Twi-Life come from?

Written by Charles Waring

Friday, 15 April 2016 12:58 - Last Updated Friday, 15 April 2016 13:25

Around the time when I named the band there were a lot of i-Phones, i- this and i- that, so I was thinking of playing off that word and playing off the word twilight - you know, equal day and equal night because I kind of had a double life: I was playing saxophone and then I wanted to do other things besides saxophone but with music. So I was beat-making. I just wanted to have another band where I just did all the things that were running in my head so I decided to call it Twi-Life, which is a weird word (laughs).

What's the story behind your new album 'Nihil Novi'? What does the title mean, for example?

Oh, that's exactly why I chose it: an archaic language that nobody knows (laughs). 'Nihil novi' is a Latin term meaning "nothing new" and the full-term is "nihil novi sub soli," which means "nothing new under the sun." It was a phrase coined by King Solomon way back in BC so it was a long time ago. He was the most intelligent King on earth, the King of Kings, and all the kings were influenced by him. He went through all these trials and tribulations and at the end of them said "there's nothing new under the sun." I think it's a very compelling phrase for me because it just means something different in each phase of my life. Right now for me it means creativity. It's not about producing something from thin air but allowing yourself to absorb what's around you so that it can influence the next creation. So that's like 'Nihil Novi,' nothing new. Just look around you and you've got all the inspiration that you need to create.



How does it compare, then, with what you've done?

Written by Charles Waring

Friday, 15 April 2016 12:58 - Last Updated Friday, 15 April 2016 13:25

It's very different. I plan on making each one my records as different as possible. I had five years between the last recording and this one. That's a lot of time to live and my experiences in that interim led me to basically going back to what I started in 2004 when I was listening to J Dilla (*pictured*) and saying "man, I wish I could make a beat like that." I have the greatest admiration for what he was doing and really appreciate how hard it actually is. So 750-plus beats later... (Laughs), I'm still like "wow, man, it's incredible how all these incredible producers like J Dilla, Madlib, Kanye (West) and Flying Lotus can produce music that is not that long - maybe a total of four minutes and it's a lot of looped music and keeps on repeating over and over - but still it's entertaining and captivating to the audience and keeps them interested for all that time. So I really appreciate beat-making and all of that really went into this record. I was living a double life before but now it's naturally come together - the beat-making and the saxophone playing.

It's got an interesting, textured sound...

Yeah, it was a very particular sound that I was going for because the intention of it was from beat-making, I've been beat-making for a long time. Along with that, you develop a taste for certain sounds because, you know, you want a certain bass sound for this song and a certain bass sound for the others. So I had to kind of look out for people who are prone to production and to understand that it's a very, very particular sound that I'm going for, so with that in mind that's why the band is really coming together because we have like-minds. You can either be open to other types of music and influences or you can just try to act as if you're in a castle (laughs) and can't experience what's outside. But I chose the other route, which is to be open and not think of it as jazz or any other genre and treat it as music, and the music that I want to create.

You're now on Blue Note records. How did that come about?

Man, I couldn't have planned it any better. It came out of the blue for me... pun intended!(laughs). I was getting together this project already and Meghan Stabile who had Revive Music wanted me to play at her stage for (New York's) Winter Jazzfest 2013. I was already putting together my new Twi-Life group and we hardly had any music prepared actually so when we got on that stage the energy was incredible and it was just like we just played what we wanted to play instead of all of the jazz or all of the funk - and I think all of the people who were involved were excited about that, to be able to play without lanes A lot of people who were in the band were also people who had also played with Meshell (Ndegeocello) so she ended up

Written by Charles Waring

Friday, 15 April 2016 12:58 - Last Updated Friday, 15 April 2016 13:25

coming to the show and that's when I thought, wow, wouldn't it be great if Meshell could produce the record, because I had been listening to all my life. Her music provided the soundtrack to my life. All her records are incredible. So I got the cojones to ask her but I asked her through Charles (Haynes, his drummer), who knows her more personally, of course. I had no idea how I was going to fund the thing (laughs) but I was determined to come up with it. That's the kind of person I am. I'd put out eight records before so I always find a way. But out of the blue I got a call from Meghan, maybe a year later, saying "hey, want to be signed to Blue Note?" and everything really spread from there and it was definitely a blessing. I'm just really grateful and it seems as if it's just meant to be.

What does it feel like to be on such an iconic jazz label? Do you feel the sense of history there?

Definitely. It's a history that I feel is treated as relative to each person's time. Some people see jazz as a castle but I see it as reflecting what's going on right now. Like Wayne Shorter, he put out all those classic records on Blue Note and that was a reflection of what was going on at that time. The same for Coltrane and the same for everybody who was on Blue Note and in keeping with that tradition I think it's important to reflect your own time. It's not so much about history but just like the tradition of being as current as you can and not worrying about the past.



Written by Charles Waring

Friday, 15 April 2016 12:58 - Last Updated Friday, 15 April 2016 13:25

Singing with you is Jean Baylor (pictured left) a member of Zhané in the '90s. How did she get involved?

I met her a while back. I was playing a gig with Marcus Baylor, who's her husband, and an incredible drummer who plays with Kenny Garrett. Jean was on the gig and I didn't really recognise that it was the same singer from Zhané so I had a very genuine, first experience of hearing her sing. Both her and Marcus are very funny people. They were cracking me up and then she got on the mic and started singing and it was the most angelic voice I had ever heard. So I decided right then and there that if I was going to have a band with vocals she was the vocalist that I wanted. I definitely made it a point to ask her to sing and I also discovered that she is a great lyricist. Those two skills, I found out, are very separate but she has honed both of them into one incredible instrument so we co-wrote three songs ('Talking Loud,' 'Alive,') on the record and it turned out beautifully.

Robert Glasper plays a couple of tracks with you.

Yeah, he plays on 'Inevitable' and 'Celestelude.'



You go back a long way with him, don't you?

Definitely. He's an incredible source of inspiration to me and many others. I met him before we graduated high school actually. There were all these jazz programs going on at I.A.J.E. (International Association of Jazz Educators) and the exciting part about it for a student is that

Written by Charles Waring

Friday, 15 April 2016 12:58 - Last Updated Friday, 15 April 2016 13:25

you get to see all these young musicians that you've been hearing about, like I was hearing about Robert Glasper from HSPA in Houston and he was hearing about me and my brother in Miami at New World School of Arts. So we heard about each other through the grapevine and then when we met at a conference the first thing we wanted to do was jam together. That's what we did and meanwhile we were listening to people like Kenny Garrett and other people at the festival playing so it was incredible experience meeting Robert and we ended up going to the same college, New School University, in New York. It was there I met Casey Benjamin, Keyon Harrold, and Bilal. It was a great community of young musicians and me and Rob were part of that community. We had a great time just learning about New York, because weren't originally from there.



Also playing on the album is bassist Pino Palladino, who's noted for his work on albums by people like D'Angelo. How did it feel to have him on board?

Oh, he's incredible, it's mind blowing. I definitely have a connection with him through Chris Dave, whose band Drumhedz I played with for a while. Pino is a part of that group and to have him on the record was a blessing, man. That was the first thing that I noticed about (D'Angelo's) 'Voodoo' when it came out. I was like, "woah, that bass sound, it's incredible, who is that?" That's Pino. He has a very warm sound. I've learned that that's exactly the kind of timbre that I want from electric bass players: hardly any bite, just a warm, fat sound. Meshell (Ndegeocello) has that too, so, you know, all these people are just an absolute dream to work with.

What did Meshell bring to the album as a producer?

She's a wizard in the studio. The studio is just an instrument for her. It's so comfortable for her. It's incredible to watch her in the process. She's very focused and if she doesn't have the right

Written by Charles Waring

Friday, 15 April 2016 12:58 - Last Updated Friday, 15 April 2016 13:25

people in the control booth, she'll kick you out. She is awesome. I was afraid to look at her because she is very intense. I really admire that and I wanted to learn from that. That, I think, was the main focus, to learn from her as much as I could because I really enjoy her records and like to listen to them all the way through and not skip tracks, which is rare these days.

What attracted you to jazz in general and the saxophone in particular?

I think because jazz is basically an art form where you can really express yourself. It wasn't about the composers but about expressing yourself and embellishing on the melody and also taking that embellishment and making a whole other piece right off the fly based on your musical knowledge. Jazz is an extremely high art. It was born out of black American music, born out of the blues and also the church, where they embellished on the melody again and again and that became jazz. So I was really attracted to it and also the second part of your question, the saxophone, I discovered when I was introduced to all the instruments in band class. Our teacher - and I say 'our' because I have a twin brother, EJ, and we were both in band class - introduced all the instruments to us: the tuba, the trombone, and trumpet, and then he finally got to the saxophone. And I thought wow, what the hell's that? I mean it's brass-wind and woodwind and it's shaped all phallic and everything and it attracted me right away so. I fell in love with it as soon as I saw it up close. I was 11 years old.



Is it true that you started on the alto sax?

Yeah. My teacher wanted me to start on the clarinet but I was like no, alto. And I think by the time I got to 14 years old, I was listening to a lot of tenor players so I switched to tenor and also

Written by Charles Waring

Friday, 15 April 2016 12:58 - Last Updated Friday, 15 April 2016 13:25

liked soprano too because when I was 11, my dad put on Coltrane's 'My Favourite Things' record on. I think it was a very defining moment for me when I heard Coltrane play that song, embellishing on the melody every single time and hearing that voice, the soprano saxophone, with that very nasal sound. So I was really attracted to those instruments but now I've come full circle and am playing alto again.



Which musicians have had the biggest influence on you?

Man, there are so many. I definitely would start with Coltrane (*pictured left*). He's a perfect example of a person who transcends music and just uses the music as a tool for a message. There's a term in West Africa called griot, a musician and poet who tells the stories of their heritage to educate people. I think that the journey of the Diaspora never really stopped so you have people like Coltrane, who I really think are griots with all the different ways he expressed himself and kept searching. You can tell it's like he's telling his story and our story at the same time.

Do you see yourself then as a storyteller like Coltrane in terms of having a message behind the music?

I don't think of myself in comparison to Coltrane but yes, I think of myself as a griot too. But I think we've lost the storytelling aspect and have institutionalised music to the point where people are just talking about the notes. Like okay, here's a B-flat scale and you've got all the notes in the scale and you just learn it and cool, now you're playing music. But no, there's so

Written by Charles Waring

Friday, 15 April 2016 12:58 - Last Updated Friday, 15 April 2016 13:25

much more to it than that - much more, and it comes from living and also comes from being able to express yourself and how you're feeling. The more ability that you have on the instrument the more you can express yourself and the more freedom you have. So the music should not be a barrier to what you're aiming for. It's a tool to get further.

That's very interesting. Coltrane, of course, was a master and you also played several years with another old master - drummer, Roy Haynes. What did you learn from him?

Oh man, it was incredible. He's the whole history of jazz. He played with Louis Armstrong, who was there at the beginning of jazz and he's also played with Lester Young, Coltrane, Joe Henderson, Ornette Coleman, Chick Corea, Pat Metheny and just about anybody. It didn't matter what era of the music they came from, he was playing with them and is a perfect example of somebody who is not putting themselves in a castle. So I learned a lot about that. I also learned about melody from him. He knew the lyrics and phrasings of his favourite recordings that we were playing, so if I played a different phrasing, he would go like "no, I want you to phrase it like Sarah (Vaughan) did." And I was like oh, okay (laughs), so I had to learn her phrasing and learned a lot about the particulars of the music and also, Roy was a very cool bandleader who never used his age as a weapon. He already knew that he was older than all of us and had more experience but he didn't use that as a weapon on stage. He was just very exemplary in the way that he led his band. I've said this in many interviews, but I'm going to say it again, the most impressive part of Roy Haynes is that we did a gig and then went outside and got into this limo and the limo guy was blasting Missy Elliott. Roy Haynes who was probably 85 years old at the time - I think he's 91 now - knew every single lyric and was singing along with the whole song. So there you go (laughs). He never stayed in a castle, he was always pushing. That's what I learned from him.



Written by Charles Waring

Friday, 15 April 2016 12:58 - Last Updated Friday, 15 April 2016 13:25

He's the embodiment really of jazz being a living entity, isn't he? It's not for museums, it's something that's alive and reflects people's lives.

Exactly. We need to stop showing Ken Burns' documentaries on jazz because it's still alive and still happening. I think one of the problems is that as jazz musicians we are very involved with learning the music and getting towards the point where we can express ourselves. It's very time-consuming but there are some other things that we can learn too. Jazz was born at the beginning of the twentieth century, that was when it started coming into the mainstream, but now we're at 2016 and a lot of things have happened since then. Communications have changed and the way that we travel has changed and radio stations and their function in our lives has changed - we can make our own soundtrack from singles from everybody's albums, or listen to the whole album on CD player or on an LP. So if we're just paying attention to the instruments and getting masterful at it we're not paying enough attention to the other factors of life that affect music too, like being aware of what's around you in the world. I think if jazz musicians really embrace the times that we're in they won't be seen so much as a museum piece. It's not just us, though, I think other people in their perception of words affect us. As soon as somebody says 'jazz,' they think oh, that's that old stuff, right? First they should listen and then decide if it's old.

Any future projects in the pipeline?

I'm already working on what will be the second record for Blue Note but I'm also working on some stuff with Chris Dave from the Drumhedz - we'll be putting out a new mix tape we're working on. Also I'm doing the next 'Blue Note 75' project which includes Robert Glasper, Derrick Hodge, Kendrick Scott, Ambrose Akinmusire and Lionel Loueke - that record is coming out soon. I also started working with this band The New Jawn - 'jawn' is the way that people in Philly say joint. We haven't recorded yet, we've just started playing but I can't wait to record with that group. It's a piano-less quartet with Josh Evans on trumpet and Christian McBride, of course, is on bass.

Catch MARCUS STRICKLAND at the Cheltenham Jazz Festival on April 30th

Tickets here: <http://www.cheltenhamfestivals.com/jazz/whats-on/2016/marcus-stricklands-twi-life/>

Written by Charles Waring

Friday, 15 April 2016 12:58 - Last Updated Friday, 15 April 2016 13:25

'NIHIL NOVI' by Marcus Strickland's Twi-Life is out now on Blue Note/Revive.