

Don Was

Groove in the Face of Adversity

Release Date: October 10

You could fill both a record store and a hat shop with the albums Don Was has touched and the lids he's donned on the way to six Grammys, an Emmy, a BAFTA, and the respect of musicians and fans of all ages worldwide.

In nearly 50 years in the music business the Was (Not Was) bandleader has collaborated with an astonishing list of top-flight artists in pursuit of making a truthful, transcendent, healing and joyful noise.

As a producer, songwriter, recording artist, music supervisor, documentarian, musical director, radio host, multi-instrumentalist, and President of Blue Note Records, Was has been enthusiastically and fearlessly genre fluid, moving freely across rock, pop, jazz, country, reggae, R&B, and world music.

Those sessions and shows have taken him all over the globe to work with everyone from Gregg Allman to John Mayer to Zucchero and every letter in between, bringing out the best in Hall of Fame names like the Rolling Stones, Willie Nelson, Bonnie Raitt, and scores more.

But in all that time, there was one thing Don Was had not done: Released an album under his own name.

That's about to change with *Groove in the Face of Adversity*, the record that brings the world traveler back home to where it all started, the Motor City.



photo credit: Miryam Ramos

Out October 10th and recorded with his latest group The Pan-Detroit Ensemble, the album's six tracks — some recorded live — encompass so much of what has marked Was's many musical contributions over the years, combining impeccable musicianship with gleeful abandon. It features thoughtful sonic cross-pollination as songs seep from steamy juke joint blues to mercurial flights of jazz fantasy to loose-limbed funk. All of it tied together, crucially, with a palpably beating heart. By turns joyful and poignant, it is a fitting way to introduce himself to this moment: Was (As He Is).

While the album is being released in 2025, this renewed blossoming of Was marks the culmination of a tough creative period going back 30 years.

“I had a moment in the early ‘90s where I’d gotten to work with all my heroes — Brian Wilson, Bob Dylan, Mick and Keith, Willie Nelson, Kris Kristofferson — all the best writers that I can think of,” he says. “I had writer’s block for about five or six years because I’d sit down, play a few chords and say, ‘Well, what’s the fucking point of this? Brian Wilson’s just up the street. What does the world need me for?’”

It was a bleak five years until he had an epiphany while working with Nelson. “I was just so filled with admiration for him,” he says of the legendary singer-songwriter. “But I realized that Willie never dropped acid and went to see the MC5 at the Grande Ballroom at 16 years old. He’s one of the greatest writers ever but growing up in 1968 Detroit is not part of his makeup. There are very few people making records right now who have that as part of their makeup. I thought ‘The thing that makes you different becomes your superpower — just be the best version of yourself that you can be.’”

Groove in the Face of Adversity finds Was finally unleashing that power with the help of a group of like-minded souls.

“The mistake most record companies make is that they sign artists they like and then try to change them into whatever’s popular in the moment,” notes Was of the timeless tale of squelched creativity. He knows as a producer and label head that, “instead, you should be accentuating the thing that makes your artist different from everybody else. It’s a good lesson and it has served me in good stead. That notion came up again when it was time to put this band together. I thought, all right, pick people who come from the same milieu as you. People who grew up listening to the same radio stations, going to the same bars to hear music, playing with each other. There’s definitely a Detroit sound.”

The Pan-Detroit Ensemble features long-time collaborators including Blue Note Records artist Dave McMurray on sax and Eminem’s Oscar-winning collaborator, keyboardist Luis Resto. Additional musicians include trombonist Vincent Chandler, trumpeter John Douglas, drummer Jeff Canaday, percussionist Mahindi Masai, guitarist Wayne Gerard, and powerhouse vocalist Steffanie Christi’an.

How did you come to found the Pan-Detroit Ensemble?

It was all really happenstance. Terence Blanchard, who’s been like an angel to me over the course of our 35-year friendship, always turns up at the right time.

He called and said he was curating a jazz series for the Detroit Symphony Orchestra with mostly Detroit-based jazz musicians and asked if I wanted to do one of the nights.

About six months out from the show I realized: I don’t have a band, and I don’t have the songs. We’ve got to figure this out!

So, I just called a bunch of people that I knew, some of whom I’ve known forever — like Dave McMurray, who was in Was (Not Was). We’ve been playing together for 45 years.

Luis Resto is a keyboard player who has been collaborating with Eminem over the last 30 years as a co-writer and co-producer. He won an Oscar for “Lose Yourself.”

He’s best known for that, but he’s quite a versatile musician. I met him when he was a teenager. He was my friend’s piano student and he’s playing on the earliest Was (Not Was) records. So those are guys that I’ve got some real history with. The rest of the band are all stellar musicians I’d worked with in Detroit over the years.

Where did the title *Groove in the Face of Adversity* come from?

It comes from my discovery of jazz. When I was 14, I was driving around Detroit with my mom who was making me run errands with her on a weekend. I wanted to hang out with my friends

instead and was being a real crabby kid. She was disgusted. She left me in the car and said, “Just play with the radio dial.” I landed on the jazz station WCHD, just as a song called “Mode for Joe” by Joe Henderson was playing. Turns out, it’s a Blue Note record.

I’d heard jazz subliminally up to that point, but

I didn’t know who Miles Davis was or Thelonious Monk or anybody. I tuned into the song just as Joe was beginning his sax solo with what sounded like anguished cries. It shocked me. I had never heard any music like that in my life. I thought he was talking directly to me and addressing my situation because I could relate to his angst. I didn’t know what he was upset about, but it was exactly how I felt being stuck driving around with my mom! About 20 seconds in, the drummer starts swinging like crazy and Joe Henderson eventually falls into the groove. And there was a nonverbal message that came through the music saying, “Don, you got to groove in the face of adversity,” meaning just relax and chill and just go with the flow with your mom.”

It turned my mood around 180 degrees over a three-minute period. When my mom got back in the car. I was a nice kid again. It was powerful testimony to the power of music. The lesson was never lost on me that artists had the capability of helping people to make sense out of life, out of the chaos and confusion of the human condition. That’s where the title comes from.

Tell me about this black and white photo of a record store that serves as the cover image.

It’s Joe’s Records, a famous record store in Detroit on what used to be Hastings Street. In the ‘40s and ‘50s there was a thriving black community with a whole solid economic base on that spot. A lot of monumental music came

from there. Joe Von Battle owned a record store right on Hastings Street. He had a funky little studio in the back where he cut a lot of classic John Lee Hooker stuff. He also recorded the sermons of Aretha’s father, Rev C.L. Franklin. Mr. Von Battle recorded Aretha there when she was 14. It was a historic place.

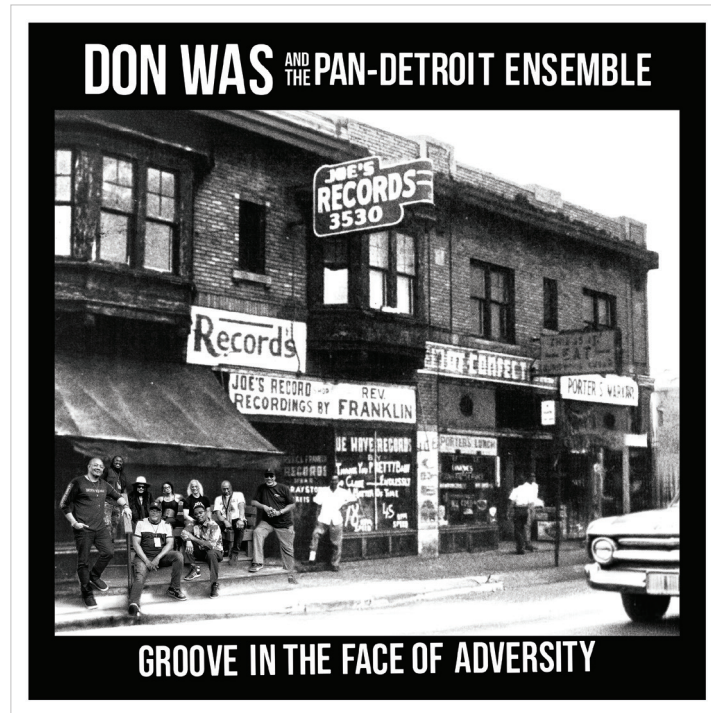
The whole area got torn down to build a ramp for a freeway as part of urban renewal in Detroit. And there were no steps taken to move

the community to another part of town. It was designed to disperse and destroy a community. The old Hastings Street represents a more romantic version of Detroit. The sound of the band comes from that street, really.

So, this album is something of an homage to that community?

Yeah, keeping the flame alive, which is a point of the band. At the start of every show, I say, “We’re the Pan-Detroit Ensemble and we are on a mission to promulgate the music of our hometown.”

I see us as ambassadors of this thing, and I don’t think anyone else is really doing that. And I’m proud of the fact that it’s not just a museum of



album artwork



photo credit: Kory Thiebault

sounds. We've taken all these fundamentals we've learned and are creating something new and fresh with it.

So, you've gotten the group together to play the gig Terence Blanchard has invited you to. Now, how do you pick the songs? And does that show, and do those songs inform this record?

We got together in a great little studio in Royal Oak called Rust Belt Studios. We just set up to rehearse, but we happened to record it. I didn't have any songs written and just picked four tracks that I played on my radio show a couple nights earlier. A couple of them ended up on the album — the Kenny Barron song "Nubian Lady" and the take of Cameo's "Insane" which was recorded during that first rehearsal.

Sounds like a good rehearsal.

Yeah. It was clear from the first 30 minutes that all nine people had a chemistry. That doesn't happen very often.

Everyone had all worked together at different points. No one was a stranger. And everyone grew up listening to the same radio station, so there's a shared musical vocabulary.

Because of all the commonality, it felt like we'd been playing together for 20 years. So right away we decided to do more than that one show. It became the opening of our first tour. Three of the songs on *Groove in the Face of Adversity* came from those shows.

While all the band members are exceptional, I have to ask about Steffanie Christi'an who sings on several diverse tracks here and just tears the roof off. Is there direction you give as a producer, as a collaborator, or do you just say, "Let it rip."

The direction is, “Be you.” Even if she’s tackling a really wide array of songs from “Midnight Marauders” to “This is My Country” or the Hank Williams song, she’s always herself and we’re just setting her against a different tapestry. She’s one of the best singers I have ever heard in my life.

You have a real mix of sounds and vibes on here. There are expansive jazz freestyles in “Nubian Lady” and your original “You Asked I Came” from the *Backbeat* soundtrack — which features a brilliant guest appearance by Terence Blanchard. You have an epic 10-minute cover of Hank Williams’s “I Ain’t Got Nothin’ But Time” and then a concise but powerful 3-minute take of Curtis Mayfield’s “This is My Country.” Did you record more than these six and then carve these out from the group or did you know that this is the mix you wanted?

The overall sound of the band is a reflection of those nine people, but it’s an outgrowth of a sound I’ve been hearing in my head and chasing for 30, 40 years and never quite got until now.

What we’re going for on this first album is a handshake. It’s “This is who we are. This is what it sounds like when we play together and bring our collective backgrounds and music with us.” We’re just introducing ourselves.

It sounds like the Pan-Detroit Ensemble will be an ongoing concern then.

Yeah, I love this. I’m going to stick with this band until I drop. I guarantee you. This feels so comfortable, and every night is fun. Even if we do the same songs, every show we play is an adventure. The only real directive we have is, whatever you did last night, don’t do that again, no matter how good it was.

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