

# Food Records

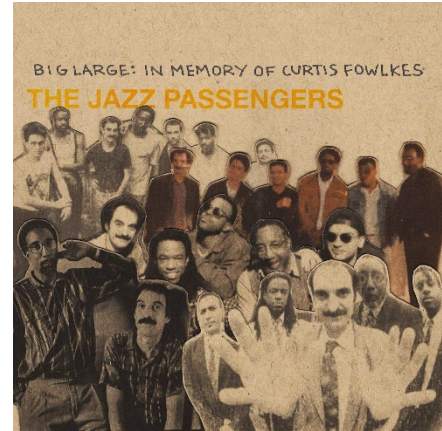
Artist: The Jazz Passengers

Album: **Big Large: In Memory of Curtis Fowlkes**

Album release: May 10, 2024

Single: "Salty Tears"

Single release: May 3, 2024



The Jazz Passengers loom large in the creative history of New York's Lower East Side. In the 40-odd years since their founding, their uniquely downtown mission of "cross-cultural exchange" has enlisted everyone from Jeff Buckley and Debbie Harry to Nick Hakim and Onyx Collective. Their signature blend of avant-garde jazz, 80s funk, world music, and 20th-century classical, coupled with lyrical provocations that range from the wistful and tragic to the vaudevillian and absurd, is a snapshot of the frenetic, syncretic New York of yesteryear: a living memory, a yearning we all have for something just out of reach. The Jazz Passengers embody that same energy - the energy of a scene and style that they helped create, and that has left an indelible mark on the culture of the city they call home.

Co-founder Curtis Fowlkes passed away in August of 2023 (*his NYT obit is here, and worth a read: <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/12/arts/music/curtis-fowlkes-dead.html>*); recorded shortly before his death, **Big Large: In Memory of Curtis Fowlkes** is a heartfelt tribute by The Jazz Passengers to their brother, a New York original – and it is imbued with all of the humor, drama, swing, groove, and chaos that have been hallmarks of their work from day one.

\*\*\*

Personnel:

Curtis Fowlkes - trombone and vocals

Roy Nathanson - saxophones and vocals

Gabe Nathanson - trumpet and vocals

Marc Ribot - guitar

Bill Ware - vibraphone, Wurlitzer, background vocals

Sam Bardfeld - violin

Brad Jones - bass, background vocals

E.J. Rodriguez – drums

Produced by Roy Nathanson and Hugo Dwyer, Engineered and Mastered by Hugo Dwyer

A&R - Isaiah Barr and Spencer Murphy

Management: Dana Ware

\*\*\*

Media:

[Full album stream-](#)

[Jazz Passengers - early video](#)

amazing archival video from the 80s - interviews with the band, performance footage, lot of B roll of lower Manhattan, Battery Park, World Trade Center, shot on VHS. True vintage NYC.

[NYT obit of Curtis Fowlkes](#), which shares some info about why he was important to his community, and a great deal about The Jazz Passengers

\*\*\*

Food Records is a label project founded by Isaiah Barr of [Onyx Collective](#), artist [Lucien Smith](#) of [Serving The People](#), and producer [Spencer Murphy](#), and is named in honor of [FOOD](#), the legendary artist-run cafe of early-70s SoHo.

## **Big Large: In Memory of Curtis Fowlkes**

### **ALBUM CREDITS**

Produced and Engineered by Hugo Dwyer. Recorded at Dimension 70 Sound and the Nathanson Basement.

#### **1. You're The Fool**

*Music by Roy Nathanson, Lyrics by David Cale. First recorded on Jazz Passengers – Implement Yourself (1990).*

Curtis Fowlkes (lead vocal, trombone), Bill Ware (vibraphone), Brad Jones (bass), Roy Nathanson (alto sax), E.J. Rodriguez (drums), Sam Bardfeld (violin), Gabe Nathanson (trumpet).

#### **2. Kidnapped**

*Music and Lyrics by Roy Nathanson. First recorded on Jazz Passengers - In Love (1994).*

Roy Nathanson (lead vocal, bari sax), Curtis Fowlkes (trombone), Bill Ware (Wurlitzer electric piano, vibraphone, bkg vocal), Brad Jones (bass, bkg vocals), Marc Ribot (guitar), E.J. Rodriguez (drums), Sam Bardfeld (violin), Gabe Nathanson (trumpet, bkg vocals).

#### **3. Salty Tears**

*Music and Lyrics by Thelma Houston. First recorded on Jazz Passengers - Deranged and Decomposed (1989).*

Curtis Fowlkes (lead vocal, trombone), Bill Ware (vibraphone), Brad Jones (bass), Roy Nathanson (alto sax), E.J. Rodriguez (drums), Sam Bardfeld (violin), Gabe Nathanson (trumpet).

#### **4. Wednesday Afternoon**

*Music by Roy Nathanson, Lyrics by David Cale. First recorded on Jazz Passengers - Live in Spain (1989).*

Gabe Nathanson (lead vocal, trumpet), Curtis Fowlkes (trombone), Roy Nathanson (soprano sax), Bill Ware (vibraphone, bkg vocal), Brad Jones (bass), Sam Bardfeld (violin), E.J. Rodriguez (drums).

#### **5. If I Only Had a Brain**

*Music by Harold Arlen, lyrics by Yip Harburg. First Recorded on Roy Nathanson Quartet – Little Fred (1990).*

Roy Nathanson (lead vocal, bari sax), Curtis Fowlkes (trombone), Bill Ware (Wurlitzer electric piano, vibraphone, bkg vocal) Brad Jones (bass, bkg vocals), Marc Ribot (guitar), E.J. Rodriguez (drums), Sam Bardfeld (violin), Gabe Nathanson (trumpet).

#### **6. Carolanne**

*Music and Lyrics by Roy Nathanson. First recorded on Fire at Keaton's Bar and Grill (2000).*

Gabe Nathanson (lead vocal), Curtis Fowlkes (trombone), Roy Nathanson (soprano sax), Bill Ware (Wurlitzer electric piano, vibraphone, bkg vocal), Brad Jones (bass, bkg vocals), Marc Ribot (guitar), Sam Bardfeld (violin), E.J. Rodriguez (drums).

### **7. Fire at Keaton's Bar and Grille**

*Music by Roy Nathanson, Lyrics by Ray Dobbins. First recorded as "Fire Suite 1" on Fire at Keaton's Bar and Grill (2000).*

Gabe Nathanson (lead vocal, trumpet), Curtis Fowlkes (trombone), Roy Nathanson (soprano sax), Bill Ware (Wurlitzer electric piano, vibraphone, bkg vocal), Brad Jones (bass, bkg vocals), Marc Ribot (guitar), Sam Bardfeld (violin), E.J. Rodriguez (drums).

### **8. Imitation of a Kiss**

*Music by Roy Nathanson, Marc Ribot, David Cale, lyrics by David Cale. First recorded on Jazz Passengers - In Love (1994).*

Curtis Fowlkes (lead vocal, trombone), Bill Ware (vibraphone), Brad Jones (bass), Roy Nathanson (alto sax), E.J. Rodriguez (drums), Sam Bardfeld (violin), Gabe Nathanson (trumpet).

### **9. Jolly Street**

*Music by Curtis Fowlkes, Lyrics by Ray Dobbins and Roy Nathanson. First recorded on Jazz Passengers - In Love (1994).*

Curtis Fowlkes/lead vocal, trombone, Bill Ware, Vibraphone, Brad Jones/Bass, Roy Nathanson, Alto sax, Sam Bardfeld, violin, E.J. Rodriguez/drums. Gabe Nathanson, trumpet.

## **From Roy Nathanson:**

The Jazz Passengers are, and have always been, a band of secret travelers. Not that they were ever quiet. They've always been a loud, goofy, seemingly incongruous bunch. The band famously started with a circus "marriage" of old Black and Jewish Brooklyn consummated through basketball trash talk, band stands, and basement jams. The foundation of the marriage is built on Curt's quiet bemusement and giant trombone, and Roy's roadrunner energy and saxophone davening. The marriage grew the magic of its collective family identity with the addition of Marc Ribot's angular guitar alchemy, Brad Jones's meticulous swinging bass, Bill Ware's insanely virtuosic vibes, EJ Rodriguez's improbable improvisational percussion genius, and Jim Nolet's, dangerous, otherworldly strings.

In those 80s days they were the vaudevillian, man-on-the-street but secret "real" jazzier alternative to the Lounge Lizard's "cool" they emerged from. Their songs featured surrealistic, yet heartfelt lyrics that were far too complicated for anyone else to remember and forms that veered off into uncharted space. Yet they were definitely songs. Songs that

grooved, then deconstructed into noise - or stayed on the interstates, exiting at patches of grass or into invisible cities. Their travels never had a clear destination, and over these almost 40 years it's become clear that their connection and their sound was their home – their ultimate destination.

The Passengers are hardly a household name, yet a seemingly endless list of iconic singers like Mavis Staples, Elvis Costello, Debbie Harry, Jeff Buckley, Jimmy Scott, and John Kelly have chosen to sing with the band. While their crazy music was loved both by critics and a relatively small but passionate fan base alike, within the first month of each of their two major record releases (with Windham Hill and Six Degrees), the labels somehow didn't know what to do with this eclectic crew and their random visiting stars, and so those labels sailed off onto their own disappearing voyages. The Jazz Passengers also traveled beyond jazz records to make gorgeous film scores like Susan Pitt's *Joy Street*, whole song cycles, and theater pieces like *The Fire at Keaton's Bar and Grill*, *Jazz Passengers in Egypt*, the science-infused *The Rock Concert*, and other text and music pieces like the radio play *You're the Fool* based on the film script Roy wrote with the help of the great Chantal Akerman.

But as Nate Chinen [stated in his obituary](#), Curt Fowlkes, known to the band as “Big Large,” was always the true heart and soul of the band. In 2023 his big heart finally gave out and left this confounding world. Fortunately, right at the beginning of this difficult year, Roy rounded the crew up yet again for one long studio session and a bunch of subsequent overdub sessions to record this album of the group's most iconic songs.

On this magical night in January 2023, in the studio at Dimension 70, when everyone could sense that Big Large's end was near, every note was equally alive and for that night, it was as if the band was back in the Westbeth basement, acting like lunatics.

For this night, they were grooving their asses off like it was 1989. As always, Curt's mellifluous voice, and crazy musicality infuses these classic Passengers' songs with his understated virtuosity and charm. Curt is joined on vocals here by Roy's son, (Curt's nephew) Gabe Nathanson on vocals, whose uncanny musicality proves his family resemblance, and by a few understated vocal tracks by Roy.

Marc Ribot, who officially left the band years ago but often returns for guest appearances, was back in the rhythm section with Bill, Brad and EJ again. And of course, they were joined this night, by Sam Bardfeld on violin, whose otherworldly string inventions have been a worthy successor to Jim Nolet's since 2002.

The music was recorded, produced, and engineered, as nearly every Passengers record has been, by the band's secret forever 8<sup>th</sup> Passenger, Hugo Dwyer. With Curt in the hospital, Hugo mined his Passengers' history to spend hundreds of hours making sense of these tracks recorded on that magical night, augmenting the voyage with overdubs when necessary.

All the songs on this record have been recorded before by the Jazz Passengers and are all original compositions except for “If I Only Had a Brain” (music by Harold Arlen, lyrics by Yip Harburg) and “Salty Tears” (music and lyrics by Teddy Randazzo and Victoria Pike). The bulk of the music for the songs on this record was composed by Roy Nathanson, except for “Jolly Street,” which was composed by Curtis Fowlkes. The lyrics for all the originals were written either by Roy, Ray Dobbins, David Cale, or a combination thereof. The songs “Fire Suite 1,” (originally sung by Elvis Costello), and “Carol Anne” (originally sung by Corey Harris) were first recorded on the record *Fire at Keaton’s Bar and Grill* (2000 – Six Degrees). “You’re the Fool” is from the 1990 album, *Implement Yourself*, recorded on New World Records. “Kidnapped,” originally sung by Mavis Staples, and “Imitation of a Kiss,” originally sung by Jimmy Scott, were both recorded on *In Love* (1994 – Windham Hill, which is now a subsidiary of Sony Music Entertainment). “Wednesday Afternoon” (originally sung by Deborah Harry) and “Jolly Street” (originally sung by Jeff Buckley) were both recorded on *“Live” in Spain* (32 Jazz).

But as Curt would have wished, the Passengers will certainly continue their travels into the future, and the old, remaining Passengers (Roy, Bill, Brad, EJ and Sam) are standing ready inspired by Big Large’s long shadow. Roy will continue to compose and write lyrics for future works, further exploring his writing after publishing two well-received books of poetry. Bill Ware will continue arranging for the band, after developing his orchestrating chops over these many decades (see his orchestrations for Jazz Passengers appearances with the BBC Radio Orchestra, Buffalo Symphony and numerous film scores). Brad Jones, who is living in Portugal these days, could never leave the Passengers and will continue crafting his elegant, carefully constructed compositions. But going forward, the motley crew will be augmented by a remarkable group of young musicians, including the singular vocalist and trumpeter Gabe Nathanson; Curt’s prize trombone student, Lucy Hollier; the great emerging young guitarist, Keyanna Hutchinson; and Roy’s crazy talented former saxophone student and Onyx Collective co-founder Isaiah Barr. Certainly, these wonderful young musicians will move the old crowd through to new recordings and other secret musical adventures. And we’ll be excited to see (and hear) where the music sojourns to with this new intergeneration mix.

But now, we are lucky to have this record. For on this record, Curtis’ sound and energy infuses every song and his deep connection to Roy and all the Passengers reaches out to you from beneath all the Passengers’ disparate musical ideas, complex, heartfelt lyrics. And more than anything, from the intention and depth of the group’s sound. Simply listening to this record is an act of honoring the remarkable life and talents of Curtis Fowlkes.