

Jacob Fred Jazz Odyssey *Meditation On A Riot*

On Aug. 30, the Jacob Fred Jazz Odyssey released its 21st album—and it's a real race record.

The Race Riot Suite (Kinnara/Royal Potato Family), as daring a project as the ambitious band has undertaken, uses a carefully constructed baroque suite to tell the story of one of America's largest racial conflicts.

This sweeping new music was written by one of the group's newest members, lap steel guitar player Chris Combs, admittedly "not someone who's had a lot of institutional education."

"Chris always had this crazy focus when it came to *The Race Riot Suite*," said JFJO's founder, pianist Brian Haas, phoning from the band's native Tulsa, Okla., during a rare break from touring. "I knew from the first sketches this had the potential to be the best record we'd ever make."

But *The Race Riot Suite* was born out of another bold, extensive project. It was born out of Beethoven.

"The OK Mozart Festival [in Bartlesville, Okla.] approached us about doing some Beethoven with a 50-piece orchestra. We couldn't say no to that," Combs recalled in a separate conversation. "It was an insane opportunity, and it became a pretty insane project."

The project served as a source of future inspiration for JFJO, a jazz band founded by college chums in a classical composition program at the University of Tulsa.

In June 2010, with the current lineup of Haas, Combs, upright bassist Jeff Harshbarger and drummer Joshua Raymer, JFJO performed "Ludwig," a newly arranged and partially improvised take on the composer's Third and Sixth symphonies.

"Getting that deep into Beethoven's brain reprograms the way you think," Combs said. "The project was so big and demanding, we had to step up and do things whether we thought we could do them or not. It was a powerful forging of the four of us. When we later started talking about a project with a larger ensemble, I was still thinking about the baroque form."

He was also thinking about a particular blemish on his hometown's history. In 1921, sparked by an unknown incident between a black boy and a white girl, widescale fighting between the races broke out around Tulsa's Greenwood Avenue—a thriving, bustling community then known as "the black Wall Street." For two days, black homes and businesses in the area were attacked, burned and even bombed. More than 800 people were injured, 39 killed. The incident was later covered up, and only in recent years have detailed accounts been attempted.

"If any subject was going to bubble up and become a full-fledged suite, this was it," Combs said. "When you first hear about it, you go, 'What?! That happened in Tulsa?!' I started researching the riot. I started writing pieces based on emotional responses to my research, just meditating on it as I wrote."

The Race Riot Suite tells the story of the event in four movements over 12 tracks. It opens with a joyous "Prelude" and the late-night party of "Black Wall Street" before catching fire in "The Burning" (the horns flutter, then become a real conflagration), taking aim with "Grandfather's Gun" and mourning losses in "Mt. Zion" and a series of transitional, improvised prayers. No vocals, just the quartet and a drafted horn section.



Caption

"The hard thing would have been for me to tell the story *with* words," Combs explained. "Writing instrumental music in this way allows me to communicate everything I feel without telling someone what they should believe, which is far too easy to do with a subject like this."

The horn players are saxophonists Peter Apfelbaum, Jeff Coffin (Dave Matthews Band, Béla Fleck) and Mark Southerland, trumpeter Steven Bernstein (Lounge Lizards, Sex Mob) and founding JFJO trombone player Matt Leland.

The musicians came into the project one or two at a time, and Combs said much of the material was tailored for their individual personalities.

"It's not a Basie-style horn section where one lush voice is making a distinct tone," Combs noted. "I wanted to write specifically to the strong personalities of each player, like Mingus or Ellington did. The suite is really American music, in the vein of both, and it also developed a Southern, sort of New Orleans flavor. At the time, historically, musicians from New Orleans were moving north and west, and many of those guys played in the territory bands around Oklahoma, like the Oklahoma City Blue Devils. They gave the music that flavor, and we're trying to capture the taste of that time."

Brought into the band as a guitarist in 2008, Combs turned to the steel guitar as an innovative means of recreating for the stage the electronic sounds on the band's experimental album *Lil' Tae Rides Again*. After that, he stuck with his Asher Electro Hawaiian lap steel.

"That's about as Okie as it gets, huh?" he said with a laugh. "Bob Wills, you know—in Oklahoma, we consider that jazz, for sure—he was inspired by Ellington and Basie. It's been pretty fun kind of redefining this thing as we tour around. There's not a lot of history for the instrument being used the way we use it, which is more as a vocalist or a horn, especially the way it sits in the quartet. It's a lot less of the pretty country instrument. Those elements are always there, though, and I feel it connects me to the landscape or the homeland or whatever. The *Suite* is a tragic story, but it's an Oklahoma story, so I've got to use the voice I feel comfortable telling it through."

—Thomas Conner