

When hearing the music of The Mercy Stone for the first time, the tight grooves, catchy vocals, and imaginative soundscapes can easily make a seasoned music-lover's ears perk up and take notice. After the struggle of trying to define this group as Indie Rock, Neoclassical, Jazz, or Pop is revealed to be meaningless, what remains is a feeling that popular music is still capable of undergoing revolutions and that The Mercy Stone is attempting to sound the alarm. The task of distilling so much beauty from such diverse genres is no simple task. But, The Mercy Stone forges a seamless path into a musical future where a popular song can possess both profound musical depth as well as enough hooks and drive to keep your road trip upbeat. Their first album, *Ghettoblaster*(2017) was a complete anomaly in the current music landscape. Progsphere gave this review: "*Ghettoblaster* is strange, off-kilter, obtuse, but also beautiful, a tapestry of weird and wonderful musical imagery and a masterwork of composition. It is not for everyone, perhaps not for most people, but for those who get it, there is little else in the entirety of recorded music that can so powerfully and completely transport you to another time, another place, another state of mind." With their second album, *Above the Towers*, The Mercy Stone has bridged the musical divide between popular music and art music in a way that should intrigue every music lover and musician of this generation.



The Mercy Stone was founded by composer/guitarist Scott Grady in 2016. After spending several years studying music composition in an academic setting, Grady sought to put his composition chops to work within a project that would have the substance and sophistication fitting for a contemporary-classical concert stage as well as the accessibility that would be palatable to rock audiences. After finishing a master's degree in music composition in 2015, he spent the next year and a half exploring how to achieve this synthesis. Understanding the pitfalls of music fusion, Grady wished to create a classical/rock hybrid style that was organic, drawing inspiration from his years of absorbing, studying, and performing all flavors of popular music (classic rock, pop, reggae, metal, funk, psychedelic/experimental rock), world music (West African drumming, Flamenco, Eastern European dance music,) along with the Western art music he studied through his years in academia.

The Mercy Stone's first musical offering, *Ghettoblaster*, is the artistic expression of a composer with a chip on his shoulder and something to prove. Feeling as if connections between art music and popular music have thus far been far too superficial, Grady has chosen to challenge audiences without abrasively superimposing the musical aesthetics of different genres and styles. Instead, with the creation of *Ghettoblaster*, he has chosen to seek common ground with diverse modern audiences and lure them whole-heartedly into a new musical space where the rhythms of Stravinsky and Led Zeppelin dance together – where the delicate counterpoint of composers from Josquin de Prez to J.S. Bach meet the sublime melodic beauty of Nirvana and Radiohead – a musical landscape where the layered soundscapes of Steve Reich and Phillip Glass blend seamlessly with the transcendent sonic textures and grooves of bands from Pink Floyd to Alt-J.

The Mercy Stone's second album, *Above the Towers*, picks up where *Ghettoblaster*, left off. Whereas their first album was entirely instrumental, this album is quite vocal-centered and contains only one all-instrumental track. While tunes such as "Wastin' Time" and "Alright" could pass for straight-up indie rock, *Above the Towers* delivers musical gut-punches in the mesmerizing instrumental sections on tunes like "Warped" and "Broke Down," beautifully funky vocal canons on tracks such as "Back of the Bus" and the title track, "Above the Towers," and intense epic sonic journeys on songs such as "Got to Be Free" and "Around the Stars." Although the first two albums from The Mercy Stone are quite different, clear connection can be heard in the poetry and craftsmanship of the music. It is wonderfully challenging to imagine where this group goes from here.

Along with the work of composition, there was also the important task of finding the right players to make the project work. The core membership of The Mercy Stone consists of players that, like Grady, walk the line between formal and non-formal musical worlds. Most of them have spent many years studying classical and/or jazz music in academic settings while simultaneously involving themselves in just about every possible genre imaginable.



Bassist/composer, Shawn Graham's early influences were classic rock bands like Rush and The Jimi Hendrix Experience. His early interest in the electric guitar eventually led to playing bass – both electric and upright. After years of intense classical and jazz bass study, Graham found The Mercy Stone to be the perfect project to connect the various aspects of his musical tastes. He has also recorded and produced two albums of original jazz music and is currently pursuing a master's degree in jazz performance.



Emmanuel Ventura-Cruess is a classically trained cellist whose journey as a musical artist began by making electronic beats as a teenager and led to him founding his own indie rock/pop band, Emael. His five-piece band incorporates traditional rock vocals and instrumentation with 'classical' instruments (cellos, violin, flute, and

bass clarinet), and electronics. Ventura-Cruess's unique approach to song-writing and arranging can be heard on his band's EP, *Venym*, as well as on their upcoming full-length album, *Glasswork*. He has also performed/recorded with members of Kansas, Low Leaf, Survivor, Al Stewart, and Toto.



Joris Daniel Hoogsteder is a drummer and composer of concert, film, and videogame music. Hoogsteder is as comfortable conducting one

of his original orchestral pieces as he is playing drums in a rock band(He is also the drummer for Emael). A native of the Netherlands, he relocated to Southern California in 2013 to begin his work on a master's degree in composition. At the same time, he was honing his commercial music chops working on music projects for the NBC Today Show, Sony Pictures Studios, Gamehouse, and Warner Bros. This type of work requires the ability to create music, often on short deadlines, for virtually any style that the job requires. This has helped make Hoosteder an incredibly flexible musician that is able to fit perfectly with The Mercy Stone's music even as they, at times, fuse many stylistic elements and explore complex rhythmic terrain.



Steven Ragsdale is a saxophonist who actively performs in various jazz, rock, pop, and classical environments. Holding a B.A. in Music Education from California State University, Fullerton, he is now working on a M.M. in Jazz Performance. Ragsdale has had the opportunity to study with great musicians such as Jeff Ellwood, Charles Richard, Bill Cunliffe, Francisco Torres, Kye Palmer, George Cables, James Rötter, and Christopher Bartz, to name a few. He is currently a member of several ensembles performing around California, including The Bill Cunliffe BACHanalia Big Band, Eleventy, Slang, Zzaj, The Noir Saxophone Quartet, and The Hyperion

Saxophone Quartet, as well as many other side projects with composers, big bands, and orchestras. Ragsdale's jazz, rock, and classical background has helped define The Mercy Stone's sound as well as helping to shape the spontaneous, improvised aspects of the music.



Nathan King is a woodwind performer, jazz saxophonist and music educator in the Orange County and Los Angeles area. He has studied with great musicians such as Gary Foster, Jeff Ellwood, Katisse Buckingham, Dan St. Marseille, Damon Zick, James Rotter and Chris Bartz and has shared the stage with artists such as Bob Mintzer, Bill Cunliffe, Bob Sheppard, Doc Severinsen, Eric Miyashiro, Wayne Bergeron, Sal Lozano, John Clayton, Gregg Field, Steve Houghton, Eric

Marienthal, Walt Weiskopf and many others. King performs in a variety of groups including his own quartet which has performed at well-known jazz venues including the Blue Whale, Catalina Jazz Club and the Alvas Showroom. Most recently, he was honored with the award of top saxophonist at the 2016 Reno Jazz Festival. King earned a Bachelor of Music in Saxophone Performance with an emphasis in Jazz and Commercial Music from California State University Fullerton and is currently pursuing a Master of Music in Jazz Studies from California State University Long Beach.