



The music on this recording was written between September 2017 and October 2023, a period that included life-changing events both personal (a cancer diagnosis) and universal (the COVID pandemic). The tunes reflect aspects of or feelings generated by these events.

While all the music on this recording is very personal, the cancer portion is by far more difficult to write about. Until recently I spoke about having had cancer very little, for fear that if someone knew about it they would cease to view me as myself, but rather as generic “Cancer Patient.” But the late Maryam “SkaterMom” Balbed led me to realize that it is only by speaking openly about cancer that we can hope to normalize it and remove stigmas and misconceptions so that the public, friends, families, and cancer patients themselves understand that statistics aren’t people and cancer isn’t an automatic death sentence.

Students of Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn will recognize the first track, “SKCC,” as a titular, melodic, and harmonic homage to Strayhorn’s composition “Upper Manhattan Medical Group” (often referred to as “UMMG”). In my case, the initials stand for Sidney Kimmel Cancer Center, where I was diagnosed, operated on, and treated.

My surgeon was Jeffrey Yen Lin, MD. Dr. Lin is the director of the Sibley Center for Gynecologic Oncology and Advanced Pelvic Surgery. In the course of my initial meeting with him he took me from “it could be benign, borderline, or malignant” to “it’s almost certainly malignant” so clearly and yet so gently the news was bearable. In “Lin” I’ve tried to capture that soft-spoken quality, combined with a sense of the drama of a cancer diagnosis.

“Waterkress” is named for my oncologist, Bruce Kressel, MD. It may seem an oddly jaunty piece for a song about cancer treatment, but Dr. Kressel has an engaging grin and I always have the impression he’s someone who might get up to mischief now and again. I felt that a light-hearted tune fit with his air of optimistic realism (or is it realistic optimism?).

Anyone who’s ever had a Benadryl drip will recognize the floating sensation of “The Platinum Taxi.” It’s written in a regular meter but the beats are distributed unevenly over a repeated bass line, giving a listener a sense of the disorientation that comes along with the drip. The title comes from my medications, carboplatin and Taxotere.

“Beatin’ the Odds” was written for me by the force of nature that is Amy Shook. When she learned of my situation she immediately snapped into action and composed a piece that, so far, has turned out to be remarkably prescient. I was only six weeks out from surgery and two weeks into chemotherapy by the time Amy wrote it and premiered it with her group. At the time of my diagnosis statistics placed my odds of surviving five years at just thirty percent. As I write this I am more than six years cancer-free.

As COVID cases started rising in late 2019 and news of the virus’s severity began to spread, the world got a glimpse of what it’s to live with the uncertainty of someone who’s had cancer, the undercurrent of questions running through one’s mind: will I get it (again)? how bad will it be? will there be a cure? will I die?

As it happened, the onset of the COVID lockdown in 2020 coincided with the culmination of five years of work towards a doctoral degree. I was happy to have fulfilled my long-held dream but after five years of full-time study (with a semester break for cancer) I felt untethered without a class structure to follow. And since performing was not an option I, like many others, found myself with much more free time than I was used to. Unlike many others I did not, however, bake any sourdough bread. Instead, I took an online class from Berklee College of Music. The course was taught by Eric Gould. With Eric's guidance and instruction I found myself coming up with sounds and rhythms that were quite different from my usual. Thank you, Eric, for opening my ears and my mind to new ways of approaching composition. The pieces of the COVID set are all outgrowths of sketches I wrote for Eric's class.

"And Then It Stopped" refers to the pandemic and lockdown in general and to March 12, 2020 specifically. That's when my email pinged and phone rang and my messages chimed all day with cancellations of all the upcoming performances I had been looking forward to. The idea of the sudden stoppage is reflected in the tune's funky broken bass line at the beginning and the lessening of intensity at the end of the melody.

Unlike those in the medical profession, first responders, and others I was able to spend 2020 at home. I realize what a luxury and privilege that was. For me 2020 and much of 2021 seemed to disappear in a blur of concerns both mundane and meaningful: what day is it? is there any toilet paper at the store? how many more have died? I don't mean to sound flippant. But the horror and the sameness and the rising numbers blended into a miasma, represented in "Last Year, Lost Year" by the floating harmonies and intertwining melody lines.

"How Much Longer" is both a question of how much longer would the pandemic continue to affect our lives and a statement about how much longer the infections, hospitalizations, and restrictions had gone on than anyone anticipated. The piece fades in with percussion, as if from afar, and fades out at the end, leaving the question unanswered.

The opening four-note figure of the last composition inspired the title "Where Will We Go?" The tune has a driving rhythmic feel, propelling us into the next chapter, whatever it will be.

Ally, Allyn, Amy Shook, Amy K, Frank, Greg, Jen, Joe, Kenny, Mercedes, Sherrie, Tim—thank you for bringing your talents and spirit to the project. I can write all the music I want but it means nothing without such stellar musicians bringing it to life. Your enthusiasm saw me through when I felt overwhelmed.

Amy K, you turned me into a bandleader. Thank you for including me in the annual Washington Women in Jazz festival and giving me the space to present whatever crazy ideas I come up with, including putting together a seven-piece band to play my original compositions and arrangements.

Amy Shook, how many times have I sent you a lead sheet or mp3 of a new piece, asking you, "Is this original or did someone else already write it?" How many times have you reassured me I can do this? You believe in me when I don't even believe in myself. (And you don't believe in the odds.)

Jen, you helped me take my first baby steps in front of a small group as co-leader of our quintet. I've learned that soloing is as much about listening as it is playing by following your example.

Sherrie, who knew, after so many years working for and with you in The DIVA Jazz Orchestra, that I would one day be in the position of asking you to be part of my band? Your musical and emotional investment in my music, to say nothing of your willingness to drive three hours to rehearse, mean the world to me.

Thanks to my brother Charlie for his vision in creating such a beautiful dual-purpose performance/tracking space, for his expertise as an engineer, and for his ears as a producer. Had it not been for guidance and encouragement from Charlie and my incredible friend and mentor Cathy Fink I would never have been organized (or brave) enough to take on a project of this size.

Finally, thanks to my ever-lovin' Moo (my biggest fan), my shared brain Tracy, and the always patient Chris for your continued support and for letting me talk endlessly about the music, the people, and the process.

- LEIGH

1. **SKCC** (5:02)
2. **Lin** (6:28)
3. **Waterkress** (5:41)
4. **The Platinum Taxi** (6:32)
5. **Beatin' the Odds** (4:34) comp. Amy Shook (BMI), arr. Leigh Pilzer
6. **And Then It Stopped** (6:00)
7. **Last Year, Lost Year** (6:58)
8. **How Much Longer** (5:36)
9. **Where Will We Go?** (3:41)

All titles composed and arranged by **Leigh Pilzer** (ASCAP) except as noted

Personnel

Leigh Pilzer, baritone and bass saxophones, bass clarinet

Ally Hany Albrecht, trumpet (tracks 1–5)

Mercedes Beckman, alto saxophone (tracks 1–5)

Jen Krupa, trombone (tracks 1–5)

Amy K Bormet, piano (tracks 1–5)

Sherrie Maricle, drums (tracks 1–5)

Kenny Rittenhouse, trumpet (tracks 6–9)

Tim Green, alto saxophone (tracks 6–9)

Joe Jackson, trombone (tracks 6–9)

Allyn Johnson, piano (tracks 6–9)

Frank Russo, drums (tracks 6–9)

Greg Holloway, percussion (track 8)

Amy Shook, bass



Recording information

All tracks recorded at Tonal Park, Takoma Park, MD

Charlie Pilzer, engineer

Tracks 1–5 recorded October 15, 2023

Tracks 6–9 recorded August 21, 2023

Production information

Leigh Pilzer and Charlie Pilzer, producers

Charlie Pilzer, mixing; Randy LeRoy, mastering

Photos: Suzette Niess Photography

Artwork/layout: Matt Rippetoe

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