

Biography Eric Legnini

Eric Legnini first made his mark in the mid-1990s as the young, discreet but highly talented pianist of the Stefano Di Battista quartet. His piano was a perfect foil for the fiery and voluble alto saxophonist. His open, generous style springs directly from the dark heart of jazz : rich phrasing, refined and sensual, always marrying itself effortlessly to the melody and the vocal. An exceptional talent for swing, grounded in a rigor and sobriety in his rhythmic placing worthy of the great masters of the hard bop. It was not long before Legnini became the grounding element amongst the disparate temperaments of the Di Battista quartet, as well as one of the most requested sidemen of the Rue des Lombards set.

Ten years have passed since his arrival on the international jazz scene —ten years during which the pianist has thrown himself heart and soul into a maelstrom of projects, while never ceasing to place his talent at the disposal of others. Today, at 35, Legnini has reached full stylistic maturity, and has decided to celebrate by finally stepping out of the sidelines with Miss Soul, his first major album on a French label. It is an opportunity to enable a wider public to enjoy his rich seductive musical universe, and his totally original way of marrying tradition and modernity, artistic savvy and popular expression. A chance to discover (or rediscover) a great musician.

Eric Legnini was born in Belgium, on February 20th, 1970. He passed a childhood immersed in Bach and Puccini. In the beginning of the 1980s, the discovery of an Erroll Garner album revealed an entirely new musical horizon, especially when it came to keyboards. With his exceptional ear for music, he tinkered with these strange harmonies seized on the fly and quickly fell under the spell of jazz—Eric had found his means of expression.

In 1987, he encountered, one of the major figures of Belgian and European jazz, saxophonist Jacques Pelzer, who invited him to perform a duo with him, then to join his band. It was a decisive point in his career that helped the young pianist deepen his knowledge and widen his repertoire of standards and thrust him into the ranks of the most promising young sidemen on the Belgian jazz scene. He was then recording his first album as principal performer on the Igloo label, Essentials, when he suddenly decided to go study in the US.

It was 1988, and Eric was barely eighteen.

He remained in New York for two years—time enough to take the pulse of the cosmopolis. He also discovered another interest : rap, and such artists as Public Enemy and Ice-T— Legnini's other great passion. He also managed to pick up a few courses at Long Island University with Richie Beirach, but above all he was getting “on-the-job training,” spending his nights in epic jam sessions in the company of the finest flower of the young jazz musicians of the period (Vincent Herring, Ravi Coltrane, Branford Marsalis, Kenny Garrett...). Through the medium of Kenny Kirkland's voluble and precise style, Legnini began to appreciate the seminal importance of Herbie Hancock in the history of piano jazz, and from then on he became a devotee of that free hard bop that is a standard of the modern Blue Note esthetic of the 1960's.

Under the double aegis of Kirkland and Hancock, Legnini returned to Belgium in 1990. He immediately obtained a position as a professor of jazz piano in the Royal Conservatory of Brussels meanwhile he hooked up with the great Toots Thielemans and joined his orchestra. There, for almost two years, he performed concerts and toured around the world. He now began an extensive amount of studio work, experimenting with funk, rap and electronic music. Now established as one of the pillars of the Belgian jazz scene, Legnini's life took another turn in 1992, when he met two Italian musicians at a Brussels club one night—trumpeter Flavio Boltro and saxophonist Stefano Di Battista, then playing with Laurent Cugny. The three men immediately clicked and they decided to work together, form a band and try their luck in Paris.

At the end of 1993, it's the jump into the great beyond : Di Battista and his orchestra head out to conquer Paris. Their seductive, resolute hard bop, combined with passion, talent and the obvious pleasure they derived from playing made them an instant sensation within a few months of their arrival. A first album with Label Bleu, *Volare*, in 1997, released to universal critical acclaim, confirmed their standing as “the new group to watch.”

It was a new beginning for Eric Legnini. The pianist was indispensable to the balance of the quintet. He remained with them through the album *Round About Roma* (Blue Note), released in 2003, and was the faithful companion of the Italian saxophonist. As his reputation amongst his peers grew, he was solicited from all sides and began a series of collaborations with the Belmondo Brothers, Eric Lelann, and Paco Sery.

Often performing with drummer André Ceccarelli, he is one of the most sought-after sidemen in Paris, and accompanies most of the great musicians as they pass through the capital, as well as in Europe, such as Enrico Rava, Joe Lovano, Mark Turner, Serge Reggiani, Aldo Romano, Philippe Catherine, Paco Sery, Didier Lockwood, Manu Katché, Richard Bobna, Henri Salvador, Christophe, Dj Cam, Sanseverino, John McLaughlin, Yvan Lins, Mike Stern, Bunky Green, Jeff Ballard, Zigaboo Modeliste, Yusef Lateef, Raphaël Sadiq, Pino Palladino, Eric Harland, Kyle Eastwood, Joss Stone, Natalie Merchant, Hugh Coltman, Yael Naim, Raoul Midon, Kurt Elling, Krystle Warren, Vince Mendoza, Michaël Brecker, Dianne Reeves, Milton Nascimento ... etc. He didn't neglect the studio either, recording about fifty albums to this date! With his reputation for musicality and savoir-faire, Legnini began working as an artistic director on a few variety albums, an activity that will achieve its apotheosis in 2004, with the co-creation of the ultimate opus of the great Claude Nougaro, *La Note Bleue* (Capitol Records - Blue Note). Another project : the production of an album, under the pseudonym of Moogoo, with the collective Anakroniq, of the first young French R&B sensation, Kayna Samet, *Entre Deux Je* (Barclay). It is a refined bit of work, bringing together his love of vocals, soul and hip hop.

In 2005, he received one "Gold Django" as the Best Jazz Musician of the Year. Once more making headlines with his participation on the album *Wonderland* (B Flat) with the Stephane Belmondo (which won best French jazz album at Victoires de la Musique 2005), as well as his production work on Daniel Mille's two last album, « *Après La Pluie* » et « *L'attente* » (Universal Jazz), Eric Legnini is today one of the major figures in the European jazz world, as well as being one of the most eclectic and prolific artists on the Paris music scene. In his first album « *Miss Soul* » as a bandleader for a French label, rich with his extensive experience as a sideman and producer, Legnini went back to tradition, with a pared-down, classic trio—bassist Rosario Bonaccorso and percussionist Franck Agulhon. With his carefully selected repertoire, deftly mixing original compositions with tried-and-true standards (some more famous than others), and pop remakes (Björk), Legnini plunges head-on into the most intimate aspects of the African-American tradition of piano jazz, whose founding fathers include Junior Mance, Ray Bryant, Les McCan and also Phineas Newborn, who is the object of several tributes on the album. The music is warm, direct, and replete with swing and gospel, and, without faux nostalgia, celebrates the timeless modernity of jazz.

The following is unique.

What happens next, to continue the tale, plays out as a trio, under his own name. "Miss Soul" in 2005, followed by "Big Boogaloo" the year after. The first in the line of 60's jazz soul; the second veering firmly towards the stage and inviting accomplices Julien Lourau and Stéphane Belmondo to dig into the groove with him. And finally, "Trippin'", the ultimate chapter in this 'trilogy', dedicated to the art of the trio; all style and no mannerism. His own trio includes the names Franck Agulhon and Thomas Bramerie, two partners of natural complicity, and an essential energy that has been tried and tested for over almost five years. The first pal is on drums, capable of holding the drive, of launching into a funky beat and falling back onto Cajun turnery. And so it goes, as long as it grooves. The second one is on the wooded double-bass, the middle pillar in the style of Paul Chambers or Dave Holland, but also with a style capable of pitting its strengths against sophisticated rhythms à la George Porter... In plain English, a virtuoso pair without airs, eclecticism without confusion, in sync with the lead; prepared to share in his trip, ready to humor his desires. « Like a DJ, I select tracks which I submit to them. I ask them to grasp their spirit, and it's not about playing them by the book ». As a result, they comment on the spot, suggest ideas, make punctuations ... That's how they polished-up on the repertoire of this album, clocking up more than 60 live concerts, before finding themselves in a recording studio. In brief, what's necessary to create a sound of a trio - solid and knitted together...and capable of answering the question : « how to introduce jazz-funk into a soul jazz trio? ».

At the beginning of 2011, Eric Legnini released the album "The Vox", the press and the public were quite unanimous, a new story that lead to one of the greatest prize in France, " Victoire de la Musique" for Best Instrumental Jazz Album.

2013, the "Sing Twice!" album is released, which title sound like a good overview on Eric Legnini's carrer. From "Miss Soul" (2005) to that album, we can take the measure of Eric's reflections about his own music. This new album sounds more like pop music than any other in his discography. This shows how much the forty-year-old pianist and composer is now able to play on both fields, after having practiced alongside with the most famous jazz musicians in Belgium.

“Sing Twice!” is nominated to the Victoires du Jazz (French Grammy Awards) on the same year. The alchemy is made from 3 major musicians (Thomas Bramerie on bass, Franck Agulhon on drums) and 3 of the most amazing voices (plus, on some tracks, a horn section, a funky guitar and some percussion from the Afro Jazz Beat). Hugh Coltman’s voice is the first one. Eric met him for the first time during Manu Katché’s TV show “One Shot Not”. Then he invited him for a show in Fall 2011. “He was bringing a more bluesy, soulful vibe... More “Stevie-like”.” It worked so well that, at the end, Hugh became a full-time band member, bringing to the album its main “soul pop” color, thanks to his unique vocal signature.

Two other singers are bringing some complementary influences on this LP : Mali-born Mamani Keita (in a more afro funk inspired way), and Japanese-American singer Emi Meyer, on the folk side. “Mamani made me able to finish what I started on The Vox. Africa is still here, and is personified by this female Griot who put an intense energy in both tracks I submitted to her. On her side, Emi is offering another point of view, clearly more folk and pop”.

Since that time, Eric continues his work as a composer and album producer (Kellylee Evans...) and plays in all-star bands, such as the quartet featuring Manu Katché, Richard Bona, and Stefano Di Battista.

In 2014, he also created, for La Villette Jazz Festival, a tribute show to Ray Charles’ album “What’d I Say” (featuring Sandra N’Kaké, Alice Russell and Elena Pinderhughes’ voices).

In February 2015, he conducted a ten-pieces band featuring Joe Lovano, Jeff Ballard, Ambrose Akinmusire, Stefano Di Battista, for the “Jazz At The Philharmonie” project.

In 2015, Eric has been working for more and more projects at the same time : touring with his “What’d I Say” project and recording Ibrahim Maalouf’s “Red & Black Light” album on Impulse!, followed by a completely sold out tour across France and Europe. This tour reached its climax on December 14th 2016, when Ibrahim Maalouf played at the AccorHotel Arena, in front of 14 000 people !

In 2017, Eric Legnini comes back on stage as a leader : “Waxx Up” is released in March, and will conclude the trilogy he dedicated to the voices (which consists of The Vox in 2011 and Sing Twice in 2013). Alongside with his own trio (Franck Agulhon on drums, Daniel Romeo on electric bass), he invites a horn section and, of course, singers : Yael Naim, Charles X, Mathieu Boogaerts, Hugh Coltman, Natalie Williams and Michelle Willis.

The very first track sets the mood and gets to the core. “I Want You Back” is not a mere tasty teaser, it rather is a three-and-a-half minute invitation, all in one breath, to fully explore this record in which Eric Legnini switches roles—and therefore perspective: with his new album, the revered pianist becomes a producer, devoting extra care to what powerful tunes and classy rhythms can do. Waxx up speaks volume into our soul, as suggested by the loudspeaker on the sleeve’s visuals; black wax has always been his fuel, his raw material, and Waxx up somehow offers itself as a sum of EPs, tailored for a chorus of voices that are fully organic to the artistic signature of Eric Legnini.