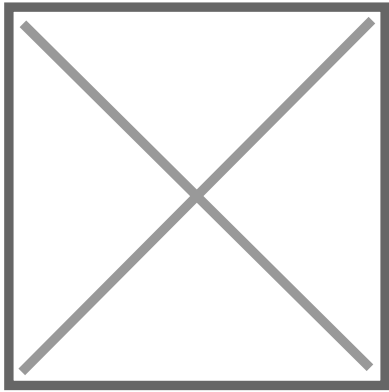




Lakecia Benjamin Has Risen: An Alto Sax Goddess in Her Noble Rise Era

Description

Co-written with Sam Bryson

Salt Lake City Alto saxophonist, composer, and bandleader Lakecia Benjamin has become one of the most dynamic voices in contemporary jazz. A five-time Grammy nominee, Benjamin is known for her radiant stage presence, ensemble-forward leadership, and a sound that braids jazz improvisation with the Black musical lineages of funk, R&B, and hip-hop. What distinguishes her, however, is not only stylistic fluency but the sense of purpose driving her work: her music insists that joy is not decorative—it is *survival*, *discipline*, and *strategy*.

Benjamin’s artistic trajectory has moved toward deeper lineage and bigger risk with each recording. *Pursuance: The Coltranes* (2020) honored John and Alice Coltrane without imitation, approaching their work as a continuing inquiry rather than a memorial. *Phoenix* (2023) extended that inquiry inward, shaped during Benjamin’s recovery from a life-threatening car accident and emerging as a meditation on return, reconstruction, and the refusal to diminish one’s voice.

A portrait of an alto saxophonist holding a golden saxophone, wearing a shimmering, embellished outfit.
Lakecia Benjamin

Presented by UtahPresents at Kingsbury Hall, Benjamin appeared with her touring quartet, Phoenix—Oscar Perez (piano), Elias Bailey (bass), and Quentin Baxter (drums)—for both an afternoon workshop with local student musicians and an evening performance. In both settings, her approach was unmistakable: music is not a display of mastery; it is a relationship built in real time.

As Les Roka noted in his preview for *The Utah Review*, Benjamin’s current artistic chapter can be understood as a kind of “regal era”—in her musicianship—an era defined not by hierarchy, but by responsibility and service to the ensemble. Leadership, for Benjamin, is not about the magnitude of volume or virtuosity. It is about how one creates conditions for others to play with courage. Roka’s observation clarifies what Benjamin brought to Kingsbury Hall: a presence that is both commanding and deeply collaborative, grounded in the belief that musical sovereignty is inseparable from generosity,

humility, and shared uplift.

Phoenix: Album as Recovery, Ensemble as Rebirth

The title *Phoenix* is not a metaphorical flourish—it is literal. Benjamin had to relearn how to play after her accident, rebuilding embouchure, breath control, endurance, and tone from the ground up. The result was not caution or smallness. Instead, her work announces that risk is not danger; risk is the path forward. Growth is not conceptual; it is lived. And ensemble music is sustained through mutual trust and shared listening.

That belief shaped everything that happened at Kingsbury Hall.

*Studio performance Audio: “Phoenix” (2023). This track reflects the album’s post-recovery clarity and collaborative ensemble identity. excerpt from **Phoenix**, illustrating the articulation, rhythmic clarity, and ensemble balance discussed in the workshop.*

Workshop: Risk, Listening, and Shared Sound

In a workshop held at the University of Utah earlier that day, Benjamin listened to several jazz groups and worked with students to critique their sound. As part of my ongoing doctoral practice, as a reviewer, I attend as many artist workshops as I can to observe not only how artists play, but how they teach, listen, and share knowledge. Some visiting performers offer encouragement; others maintain distance. Some save their energy for the spotlight.

In the workshop, Benjamin worked directly with student musicians—not only that she jumped up and played with them. One faculty noted to students how lucky they were. After listening to their performance, she began by acknowledging what was already strong: a grounded groove and attentive listening.

Then she asked them to go further:

“Take more risks.”

She observed that the band sounded more relaxed in the swing section than in the hip-hop feel:

“There’s some hesitation here. Don’t lock up.”

Her feedback was concrete and musical:

To the drummer:

“Open up that hi-hat! let the beat move.”

To the pianist:

“Try opening your voicings up a little more. There’s space here.”

She then encouraged the group to try a chorus where someone intentionally shifted the phrase or feel—a controlled experiment in improvisational flexibility.

When students asked about confidence and self-doubt, Benjamin did not frame confidence as a personality trait. She explained that even established musicians experience uncertainty, and that musical growth requires pushing beyond familiar patterns—one rehearsal, one gig, one solo at a time.

This was applied musicianship, not abstraction. The concert that night would continue the same conversation.

Jazz is a dance of listening. The solos may shine, but the music belongs to the ensemble.

Live Performance (timestamped). This moment captures Benjamin’s: “Let it go” let it flow.”

Performance: Control, Energy, and Collective Motion

By the time the house lights dimmed, Benjamin’s band was already building energy onstage—Perez on piano, Bailey on upright bass, Baxter shaping rhythm with precision and warmth. When Benjamin stepped out in gold pants and white platform shoes, she greeted the audience with:

“What’s up, Utah?”

The music took off with momentum that felt both grounded and open. Benjamin’s tone was assertive and clear, her phrasing rhythmically confident. What stood out, though, was how she played with the band, not above it. Phoenix is a quartet of mutual trust, not accompaniment.

The second tune opened with spoken rhythmic phrasing between Benjamin and Baxter. Bailey’s bass centered the groove; Perez traced Benjamin’s melodic ideas with complementary gestures. Improvisation unfolded like a shared line of thought, not alternating spotlights.

Perez’s later two-keyboard solo—right hand on Nord, left on acoustic piano—was notable not for flash but for its clarity and phrasing. Bailey’s bass remained unwavering and warm, while Baxter shifted the ensemble through dynamic arcs with touch rather than volume.

A female alto saxophonist standing gracefully, dressed in a shimmering golden outfit with fringes, ho
Lakecia Benjamin

“My Favorite Things”: Reframing the Familiar

Benjamin introduced her arrangement of “My Favorite Things” by acknowledging its lineage through **Alice Coltrane**. She opened the piece with a cadenza that moved fluidly through

registersâ??bright altissimo, full midrange, resonant lows. When the band entered on a 6/8 Afro-Cuban groove, the tune became a modal landscape rather than a quotation. The familiar melody was still present, but the point was exploration, not replication.

Perezâ??s long, building solo drew increasing momentum through repeated figures and shifting accents. Benjamin stepped back and gestured for the audience to respondâ??acknowledging the ensemble effort rather than a soloist playing in isolation.

Live Performance: â??My Favorite Thingsâ?• â?? Benjaminâ??s modal reimaging in the spiritual jazz lineage of Alice Coltrane.

â??Amazing Graceâ?•: Rebuilding as Aesthetic

Her arrangement of â??Amazing Graceâ?• opened as a duet with Perezâ??spare, spacious, unhurried. The melody arrived in fragments, like memory surfacing. Benjamin used timbre with intention: open, rounded low notes; delicate upper-register tone; brief moments of breath-shaped texture.

The tune did not resolve so much as open into stillness.

When she explained having to rebuild her ability to play after her accident, the audience understood how much that song meant to Benjamin.

Conclusion

Those who attended both the workshop and the concert witnessed a continuous arc:

Risk is part of the work.
Growth is daily, disciplined, unfinished.
Music is made with others, not alone.

Benjamin did not present joy as ease.
She made joy audible as commitment.

Selected Discography

- **Retox** (2012, MotÃ©ma) [Link here](#)
Energetic debut blending jazz-funk and big band influences.
- **Rise Up** (2018, Ropeadope) [Link here](#)
Groove-forward compositions with political and social urgency.
- **Pursuance: The Coltranes** (2020, Ropeadope) [Link here](#)
Tribute to John & Alice Coltrane featuring multigenerational collaborators.
- **Phoenix** (2023, Whirlwind Recordings) [Link here](#)
Recorded during Benjaminâ??s physical and musical recovery; produced by Terri Lyne Carrington; **nominated for Best Jazz Instrumental Album**. [Link Here](#)
 - â??Amerikkan Skinâ?• â?? **Nominated for Best Instrumental Composition** [Link here](#)
 - â??Basquiatâ?• â?? **Nominated for Best Jazz Performance** [Link here](#)

- **Tiny Desk Concert** (2024, NPR) [Link here](#)
A performance emphasizing ensemble intimacy, groove, and community joy.
- **Phoenix Reimagined (Live)** (2024) [Link here](#)
Featuring John Scofield, Randy Brecker & Jeff Tainâ• Watts; **nominated for Best Jazz Instrumental Album and Best Jazz Performance.** [Link here](#)
- **Forthcoming: Noble Rise** (2025) â• Featuring Immanuel Wilkins & Mark Whitfield
Continues Benjaminâ•s â•regal era,â• emphasizing sovereignty-as-service, shared uplift, and ensemble-forward leadership. [Link here](#)

Across these projects, Benjaminâ•s work traces a trajectory from groove-centered celebration to lineage-bearing tribute to deeply personal creative renewal â• all rooted in ensemble trust and the belief that jazz is a living, communal practice.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Lakecia Benjamin is a New Yorkâ•based alto saxophonist, MC, bandleader, composer, and educator known for her bold sound and radiant stage presence. A five-time Grammy nominee, she blends jazz with the Black musical traditions of funk, soul, R&B, and hip-hop. Her 2023 album *Phoenix* earned three Grammy nominations as well as an NAACP Image Award nomination for Outstanding Jazz Album. The follow-up release, *Phoenix Reimagined (Live)* (2024), received two additional Grammy nominations, further affirming her position as one of the leading voices in contemporary jazz.

Benjamin has performed on *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* and was featured in NPRâ•s Tiny Desk Concert series, where her ensemble-forward approach and commitment to community-centered performance were on full display. Born in Washington Heights, she studied at Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School and The New School, where she worked with influential mentors including Gary Bartz and Reggie Workman. She has performed with Stevie Wonder, Alicia Keys, and The Roots, among others, and is a sought-after educator, leading workshops and masterclasses nationally.

About the Authors



Professor Sam Bryson is the Director of Percussion Studies at Weber State University and a recipient of the 2025 Presidential Teaching Excellence Award. He holds an MFA in Percussion Performance from Northern Arizona University. He has a demonstrated history of leadership in music education, conducting symphonic, marching, and pep bands as well as percussion ensembles. Bryson is known for his impactful teaching, student mentorship, and contributions to nonprofit organizations, instructional design, and music research.

Â¹ Les Roka, â??Lakecia Benjamin and Phoenix set to take UtahPresents stage Oct. 23 as part of blockbuster jazz series,â?• The Utah Review, October 20, 2025.

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