

NINETY-SIXTH SEASON

Friday, October 2, 2026, at 8:00

Jazz Series

FREEDOM RIDERS WITH SPECIAL GUESTS KURT ELLING AND LIZZ WRIGHT

Sarah Elizabeth Charles Vocals

Alfredo Colón Alto Saxophone

Tomoki Sanders Tenor Saxophone

Milena Casado Trumpet

Carmen Staaf Piano

Ben Williams Bass and Music Director

Makaya McCraven Drums

Sasha Berliner Vibraphone

Kurt Elling Vocals

Lizz Wright Vocals

The program will be announced from the stage.

There will be no intermission.

Funding for educational programs during the 2026–27 Season of Chicago Symphony Presents Jazz has been generously provided by Dan J. Epstein, Judith Guitelman, and the Dan J. Epstein Family Foundation.

Chicago Jazz, *DownBeat* magazine, and WDCB 90.9FM Jazz are media partners for this event.

Freedom Riders



In reverence to the courage and struggle of the original Freedom Riders—organized by the Congress of Racial Equality in 1961—the Freedom Riders band is a groundbreaking new international jazz collective that shares the history of previous civil rights struggles and amplifies current messages of social justice through music. As part of the NYC Winter Jazzfest, the ensemble features a new generation of composers performing powerful standards and original music that continue the tradition of providing a soundtrack to the global civil rights movement. Led by Music Director Ben Williams,

Freedom Riders is rounded by the weight of musicians and activists who came before us. The band offers vital inspiration through music, uniting audiences with the energy and spirit of shared humanity. Expect special guest NYC Winter Jazzfest alums to join the ensemble on tour.

Sarah Elizabeth Charles Vocals



Sarah Elizabeth Charles is a vocalist, composer, producer, and teaching artist based in Brooklyn, New York. She has worked with Geri Allen, Chief Xian

aTunde Adjuah, Terri Lyne Carrington, George Cables, and Brandee Younger and has released five critically acclaimed albums under her own name.

In addition to her music-performing and creating career, Charles is a lead teaching artist with Carnegie Hall at Sing Sing Correctional Facility and coteaches two self-designed courses with Caroline Davis on gender equity and music at the New School. The honors she has received include the Yale School of Music's Distinguished Teaching Artist Award and Chamber Music America's New Jazz Works Grant, two awards that recognize her uniqueness as an artist.

Alfredo Colón

Alto Saxophone



Dominican American saxophonist and composer Alfredo Colón is a proud New York City native. His playing has been described as authoritative and fiery yet

mournful and melodic. Drawing on his interest in Dominican folklore and the works of visionary saxophonists Albert Ayler and Ornette Coleman, Colón creates a musical atmosphere that highlights beauty by framing it in disarray. Alfredo Colón has worked with artists such as Henry Threadgill, Moses Sumney, Zack Villere, William Parker, Amirtha Kidambi, Cafuné, Hamid Drake, Cautious Clay, Toninho Horta, Dawn Richard, and Aaron Parks. In 2020 he was awarded the Jazz Coalition Commission Fund Grant. He was awarded Roulette Intermedium's Van Lier Fellowship in 2022 and was a Roulette Resident Artist in 2023.

Tomoki Sanders

Tenor Saxophone



Tomoki Sanders was born in New York City in 1994 and began studying drums and percussion at four, adding E-flat clarinet at six and alto saxophone at ten before

settling on tenor at fourteen. They played their first gig at thirteen and

worked steadily through schools, clubs, and venues across Japan's Kanto region, making an early recorded appearance as a sideplayer with the psychedelic rock band Tengoku Batake Japon. Sanders attended Berklee College of Music from 2014 to 2018, studying performance and music production with Ralph Peterson, Jr., Billy Kilson, Tia Fuller, George Garzone, and Frank Tiberi. Now based in New York, they have performed alongside Pharoah Sanders, Kassa Overall, Moses Sumney, Ravi Coltrane, the Jack DeJohnette Trio, Taylor McFerrin, and Mark de Clive-Lowe, moving freely between jazz and experimental music. Their debut album is forthcoming on Brownswood Recordings.

Milena Casado Trumpet



Trumpeter and composer Milena Casado stands among the most compelling voices to arrive in jazz in recent years. Her improvising is fluid, and her compositions

are deeply personal, moving between acoustic playing and electronic experimentation without ever losing the thread. The *Los Angeles Times* named her a must-hear newcomer sustaining the music's forward momentum, and WBGO has counted her among the contemporary artists most deserving of attention. Casado has worked with Terri Lyne Carrington, Aaron Parks, Somi, Jorge Rossy, and Kris Davis, and her performances have taken her to

PROFILES

Carnegie Hall, the Village Vanguard, North Sea Jazz Festival, Montreal International Jazz Festival, and Monterey Jazz Festival. As a bandleader, she fronts her own working quintet. Her debut album, *Reflection of Another Self*, released by Candid Records, is a sonically adventurous account of self-discovery and resilience.

Carmen Staaf Piano



Carmen Staaf, called “a consummate jazz pianist” by Herbie Hancock, spent eight years as pianist and musical director for NEA Jazz Master Dee Dee Bridgewater, and

she won the Mary Lou Williams Jazz Piano Competition. She studied anthropology at Tufts University, took a degree in jazz performance at New England Conservatory, and continued at the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz Performance. Her recordings as a leader and coleader include *Sounding Line* and the Allison Miller collaborations *Nearness* and *Science Fair*, all on Sunnyside, along with *Woodland* for Newvelle Records, and *Parlour Game* on the Royal Potato Family label. Staaf has played the Playboy Jazz Festival alongside Herbie Hancock and Wayne Shorter, Jazz at Lincoln Center, the Kennedy Center, Village Vanguard, Blue Note, and Newport, Monterey, Montreux, and North Sea festivals. She joined the piano faculty at Berklee College of Music in 2005 and also teaches at the New School.

Ben Williams Bass and Music Director



Bassist Ben Williams is the music director of Freedom Riders.

A Washington (D.C.) native, he graduated from the Duke Ellington School of the Arts, earned a

bachelor’s degree in music education at Michigan State University under Rodney Whitaker, and completed a master’s degree at the Juilliard School with Carl Allen. His win at the 2009 Thelonious Monk International Jazz Bass Competition led to a contract with Concord Records, which issued his debut, *State of Art*, in 2011. The album drew four and a half stars in *DownBeat* and reached number one on the iTunes and *Billboard* jazz charts. *Coming of Age* followed in 2015, and *I Am a Man* was released on Rainbow Blonde Records. Williams won a Grammy Award with the Pat Metheny Unity Band, was named iTunes Breakthrough Artist of the Year, and has worked with George Benson, Stefan Harris, Lauryn Hill, Wynton Marsalis, Robert Glasper, and Nicholas Payton.

Makaya McCraven Drums



Drummer, composer, and producer Makaya McCraven has been called a cultural synthesizer, a musician who collapses distance and blends past and

present into poly-textural, jazz-rooted twenty-first-century folk music. He was born in Paris in 1983 to the Hungarian singer and flutist Ágnes Zsigmondi and the American jazz drummer Stephen McCraven and grew up near Northampton, Massachusetts, in a community where Marion Brown, Yusef Lateef, and Archie Shepp passed through. He moved to Chicago in 2006 and worked with Willie Pickens, Marquis Hill, and Jeff Parker. His debut album, *In the Moment*, assembled from a year of live improvisation, arrived on International Anthem in 2015, followed by *Universal Beings*, *Deciphering the Message* for Blue Note, and the seven-years-in-the-making *In These Times*. The 2025 compilation *Off the Record* gathers four new EPs. He is a longtime collaborator with Junius Paul and Jeff Parker.

Sasha Berliner Vibraphone



Vibraphonist, composer, and producer Sasha Berliner grew up in San Francisco, where she played rock drums before finding the vibraphone at Oakland School for the Arts. She

went on to study with Stefon Harris at the New School, and her New York debut came at Winter Jazzfest in 2018. The following year, she became the first American recipient of the LetterOne Rising Stars Jazz Award, which underwrote her touring and her debut album, *Azalea*. In 2020 she won the *DownBeat* Critics Poll for Rising Star—Vibraphone, becoming the youngest musician and

the first woman to do so, and she has placed among the top ten vibraphonists in the *DownBeat* Readers Poll every year since 2021. Her albums include *Onyx*, tracked entirely to analog tape for JMI Recordings, the live suite *Tabula Rasa*, and *Fantome*. She is a professor of jazz and jazz composition at the University of California, Irvine, and has guest-lectured at Berklee College of Music.

Kurt Elling Vocals



Kurt Elling is a two-time Grammy Award winner who is renowned for a signature rich sound and an inventive and individualized body of work. With a

one-of-a-kind brand of contemporary beat lyricism and vocalese-writing ingenuity, the Chicago-based musician has extended the parameters of vocal jazz and enlarged its vocabulary.

Over a twenty-five-year career of touring and recording, Elling has earned seventeen Grammy Award nominations and has won three Prix du Jazz Vocal (France), two German Echo awards, and two Dutch Edison awards. He has had a fourteen-year run atop the *DownBeat* Critics and Readers polls and won twelve Jazz Journalists awards for Male Vocalist of the Year.

From Fall 2025 through Spring 2026, Elling starred on Broadway as Hermes in the Tony Award-winning musical *Hadestown*. His work with other leading figures in the jazz world includes collaborations with Branford Marsalis, Danilo

Pérez, Fred Hersch, and Stefon Harris. He has performed as a featured soloist with many of the world's leading large ensembles, including the New York Philharmonic, BBC Concert Symphony, WDR Big Band and Orchestra, Clayton-Hamilton Orchestra, and Village Vanguard Orchestra.

In addition to his work as a lyricist and composer for his own ensembles, Kurt Elling has cocreated multi-disciplinary performances for Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre and the City of Chicago. Jazz At Lincoln Center saw the world premiere of *The Big Blind*, a jazz musical that Elling cowrote with collaborator Phil Galdston ("Save the Best for Last").

Elling has toured the world in a variety of contexts, including UNESCO-sponsored International Jazz Day performances in Cuba, Russia, Australia, and Washington (D.C.) and in April 2026 in Chicago, where he spearheaded efforts to make it the host city. He has appeared twice at the White House, including a performance in collaboration with the late Marvin Hamlisch and the National Symphony Orchestra for President Obama's first state dinner.

As a music industry leader, Elling spent six years serving as a trustee and two years as vice chairman of the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences.

Lizz Wright Vocals



Lizz Wright is one of the great modern American singers, with an illustrious twenty-year career that transcends social divides through her offer of love and deep

sense of humanity.

Wright culls inspiration from her Southern upbringing in Georgia, where she was the musical director of a small church pastored by her father. The call-and-response singing with the church congregation was her first brush with music.

Wright first made a name for herself nationally at the age of twenty-two as a vocalist with a touring concert tribute to Billie Holiday. At twenty-three, she signed with Verve Records for the 2003 release of her debut album, *Salt*, which topped Billboard's Contemporary Jazz Albums Chart. She went on to record for Universal Music Group, releasing *Dreaming Wide Awake*, *The Orchard*, and *Fellowship*. On Concord, Wright released *Grace and Freedom & Surrender*, featuring the single "Lean In," which landed on President Obama's summer 2016 playlist.

In 2020 Wright took her culinary skills, as a graduate of Annemarie Colbin's Natural Gourmet Institute of New York, to Carver 47 Food & Wellness Market (C47) on the South Side of Chicago. Housed inside the distinguished Little Black Pearl Art and Design Academy (North Kenwood, Chicago) and founded by innovative

Chicago business leader and designer Monica Haslip, Carver 47 operates in homage to the market's fundamental dignitary, the legendary George Washington Carver.

Wright launched her own independent record company, Blues & Greens Records, with the June 2022 release of *Holding Space*, a live album (produced by Christian Ulbrich) capturing a 2018 Berlin concert, along with a companion short film of the same name.

In 2024 Wright released her studio debut album, *Shadow*, featuring

acclaimed artists Angelique Kidjo and Meshell Ndegeocello. Anchored by acoustic guitars and layered with string quartets, harp, Carnatic Indian classical strings, gospel vocals, and bare emotion, *Shadow* presents Lizz in a gentle and triumphant light. On September 25, 2026, Lizz Wright and acclaimed pianist Kenny Banks, Sr., released *Nearness*, an intimate testament to their twenty-year musical kinship. The eleven-track album of standards and spirituals is an experience of communion and collaboration.

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