In Search Of Spaces

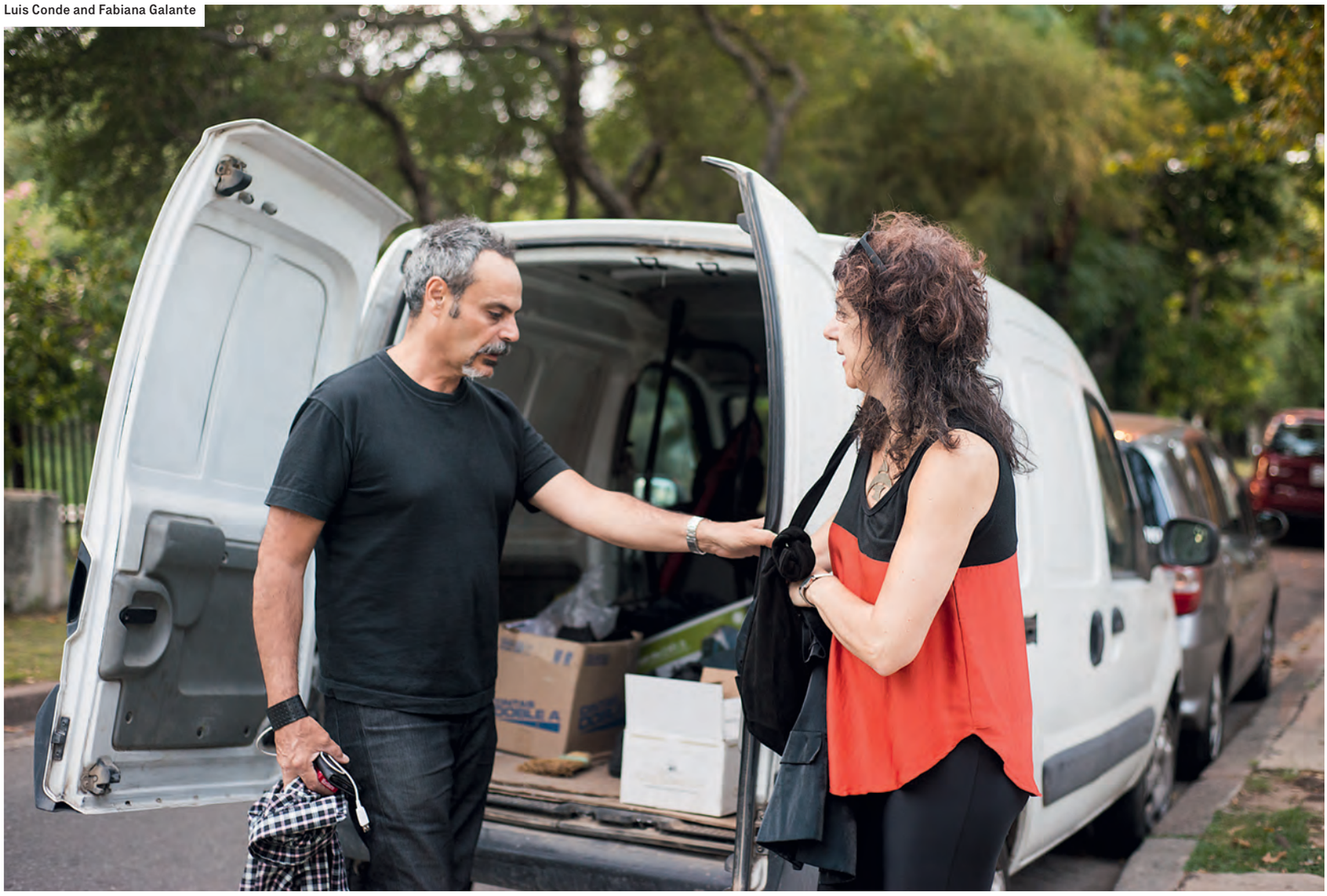
Outside the festival circuit and distanced by economic upheaval **the free music of Buenos Aires** has developed its own survival tactics, from performances in people's homes to public happenings. By **Jason Weiss**. Photography by **Angeles Peña**

"The music we've chosen to play," says multi-reed instrumentalist Luis Conde, "is a space where we're always standing in the midst of a crisis, a crisis of the elements." Improvised music is not for the faint of heart, and in Buenos Aires, it seems, even less so. Yet the music is flourishing there – the audiences at events I attended over a trip in 2016 were no smaller than at home in Brooklyn, and the music is every bit as engaging. As in European or American cities, the music survives on a DIY homemade spirit to subvert conventions and construct its own presence. Yet the struggle is waged against greater odds. "We find our support in the vortex of the crisis, the instability," continues Conde, who has followed a circuitous route through literature, free jazz and rock to reach improvisation. "We have no place, but we're connected with everyone, with people in Europe, the US, Chile, Uruguay, Brazil, and we have good dialogues with them all." This fruitful rapport can be heard in Conde's provocative duo performance *Mirrors Edges* with Norwegian saxophonist Frode Gjerstad, as well as their trio performance *Give And Take* with Conde's partner, pianist Fabiana Galante.

Conde and Galante live in a comfortable modern apartment near the northern city limit. Their place isn't large, though the open floor plan makes it look otherwise, enough at least to host some friends, his horns and her Steinway baby grand, along with the upright in the hallway, both inherited from her family. Like him, she is in her early fifties and took a winding path to her practice as an improvisor, from an early and extensive training in classical and contemporary music, with studies at La Plata and in Scotland. For his part Conde started studying music intensively when he was 26. To underline the precariousness of the experimental musician's life in Argentina, Galante notes there is little state support for improvised music, "nor for art practices that are hard to classify like ours". Yet she finds benefit in such conditions, since the musicians have nothing to lose, "which generates perhaps another type of musical situation. The degree of risk, in terms of the sound, is left to our own devices. So we can do what we want." The city's free improvisors tend to be fearless in what they take on, experimenting with whatever suits them and creating their own opportunities.

As a measure of such initiative, for the past ten years Galante has co-produced the series Instantes Sonoros with Carlos Murat, who has documented most of the events on video – the YouTube channel Warnesgroup holds an invaluable trove of his videos covering improvised music in Buenos Aires, and he

Luis Conde and Fabiana Galante



has built up an important audiovisual archive dating back to the late 1990s. Instantes Sonoros presents "improvised music, performance, sound art, nearly everything outside of the mainstream, that has no clear label" according to Galante, and the organisers pay out of their own pockets to maintain the series at Domus Artis, a cultural centre in the city's northern district of Villa Urquiza. All the local improvisors have played there, as well as many foreign musicians, each knowing that the pay will be minimal. Galante is stoical about its survival in the current political and economic winds. "Perhaps that will be the end of it," she shrugs, "or maybe it will continue somewhere else." Which fits with Conde's perception of the local improvised music having aspects of a nomadic existence. "We seek out our own spaces, which keep changing all the time," he says. "A music that has to always be new cannot be played always in the same place. It has to be mobile, travelling."

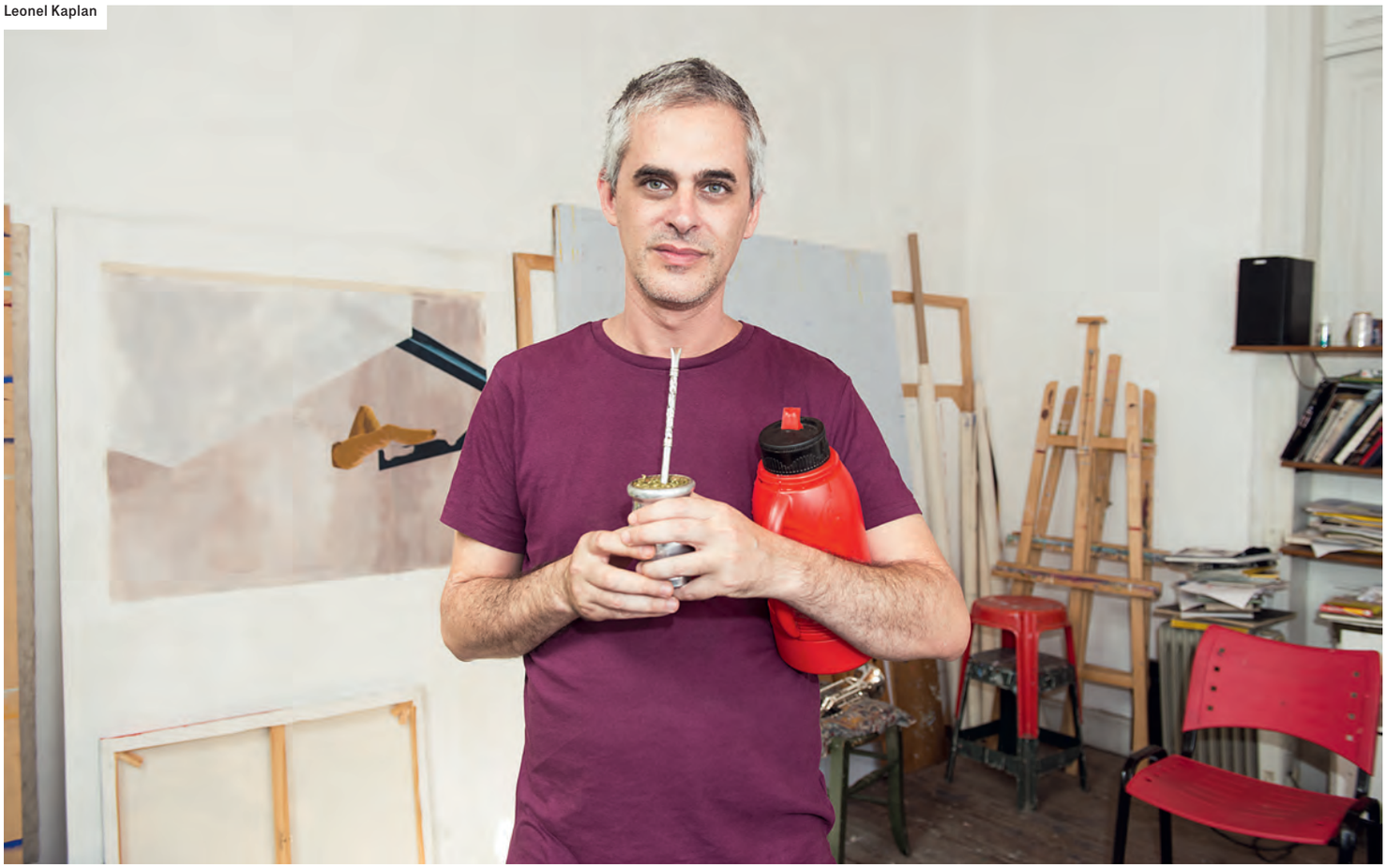
How much do the musicians themselves manage to travel? Improvised music, paradoxically, has grown most since the last economic shock around the turn of the millennium, with the Argentine default and the devaluation of the peso, even as some practitioners moved to Europe or the US. Of the many who stayed, however, most have played abroad at least a little. Conde's groups have visited New York and Barcelona; in 2016, he did a three week residency in Santiago, working with local musicians and non-musicians to develop a piece based on five Chilean poets. Perhaps the most intrepid traveller has been trumpeter Leonel Kaplan, who has focused in the past 15 years or so on extended techniques and pure sound. Now in his early forties and shifting direction, he initially studied mainstream jazz, which led to free jazz and avant garde music, and thus to Bill Dixon's work. Around 2000, he began to encounter improvisors and composers in Buenos Aires who were oriented toward texture, incorporating sensibilities from contemporary music: Sergio Merce, Lucio Capece, Gabriel Paiuk and Diego Chamy, as well as Luis Conde. They formed the collective Música Actual en Buenos Aires and organised numerous concerts before it ceased activities around 2007.

I catch up with Kaplan one morning at his studio in the Flores district, west of the city centre and part of a cluster of spaces that he shares with painters, before he scoots off on his bicycle to pick up his kid from school. In a couple of days he's due to present a duo concert of new work in the same studio space. "There was even a point when we had a certain 'support' from the state," he recalls regarding the Música Actual years, "which lasted for a year until they realised they didn't like it and threw us all out." Soon, though, he was going to Europe, and did various tours with Wade Matthews, Axel Dörner, Michel Doneda, and with Nate Wooley in the US as well. Playing abroad, he says, "ends up not much different than in Argentina. We all have the same problems. I had the opportunity to see many different realities, and now I'm at peace with myself. I'm here, this is what I'm doing. The people I play with or relate to, in a certain sense they too are outsiders in their own countries. I'm further away, but that's all."

For several years his duo with percussionist Diego Chamy toured throughout Argentina. "The places we played ranged from universities to towns where there was nothing," he recalls. "We had every sort of audience. It was a lot like in the 1960s and 70s in Europe, that sort of energy. To suddenly go play in a very small town, and an older woman comes who says it made her think of the wind or when she's in the mountains, or people come who say you're like the Hitler of music. There were even fights, between people who wanted us to stop playing and people who wanted us to keep playing."

Improvised music in Argentina has been around a

Leonel Kaplan



long time. But years of dictatorship prevented any continuity, effecting a cultural blackout, as writer Ernesto Sábato put it. As a result, improvisors of today came to their practice with little sense of local history beyond a certain jazz or contemporary music lineage, splintered by exile. The late 60s offered some shocks to the musical system (in a city that was no stranger to the avant garde) which, while they didn't exactly take hold, at least registered on the landscape. In June 1966, just as General Juan Carlos Onganía was leading a military coup, Steve Lacy's quartet arrived in Buenos Aires, at that point not exactly safe harbour for free jazz. Despite opposition the group gained a small following, appearing on television, at a museum, in private homes, but they couldn't earn enough for their return flights. When the quartet – Lacy, Enrico Rava, Johnny Dyani, and Louis Moholo-Moholo, in retrospect more of a supergroup – played at the venerable Instituto di Tella, whose experimental music center was directed by the composer Alberto Ginastera, Lacy instructed the group to do two free improvised sets of 20 minutes each; it proved to be their only document of the whole adventure, and *The Forest And The Zoo* was released by the ESP label the following year.

A more fundamental precursor to later improvisors in Buenos Aires, however, was the work of Movimiento Música Más, a collective formed around that same time by the core trio of musician-composers Guillermo Gregorio, Norberto Chavarri, and Roque De Pedro, along with various artist and non-artist associates. They staged musical events and interventions throughout the city, including on public transport – Chavarri's 1971 piece *Música Para Colectivo Línea 7* saw six musicians board a city bus and turn it into a musical instrument from inside – and played improvised music in concert halls, always in a spirit of art provocations and social engagement. Boldly, or foolishly, they continued to perform publicly throughout that dictatorship (Onganía had been toppled in 1971 by a military junta led by General Alejandro Agustín Lanusse, who stepped down in 1973, but the worst was yet to come with the Dirty War initiated by General Jorge Rafael Videla's coup d'etat in 1976). Musicians like Conde and Kaplan only became aware of MMM years after they themselves had already been playing, although Kaplan later got to know Gregorio on visits to the US. Conde is organising a reunion and tribute to the collective in Buenos Aires between May and August of 2017.

When researching in advance of my trip to Argentina, I kept running across the name of Enrique Norris. Around the time of Steve Lacy's visit to the capital, in the city of Río Cuarto in the province of Córdoba to the west, Norris was in high school and acquiring his first jazz record, the *Glenn Miller Story* soundtrack (with two pieces by Louis Armstrong's group). Over the next 20 years he studied and worked with many musicians in the region until he moved to Buenos Aires in 1985; 30 years after that, the cornet player and pianist is a sprightly elder of improvised music, leading his own Norris Trio for a decade now and playing in other groups, some with former students. From a classical music family, and a lifelong listener to the radio, he developed an agile imagination and a wide appreciation of music; whatever he does ends up sounding original. To date, he has released eight records of the trio, including 2016's *Tonadoda*. "Each time we make a record," he says, "many tunes are left out, because we play a lot of pieces throughout the year, our own and by other people we like – Monk, Ornette, Duke, Sun Ra. I like to think of the music we do as coming from jazz, with a lot of freedom."

Norris does not own a cell phone, and only goes online every couple of days at an internet cafe. But when I mentioned in my first email that I would like to hear more about Lacy's lost year in Buenos Aires, he replied with a substantial dossier of documents on the subject in English and Spanish and a long list of names. A month later, I discovered he lives and works in a smallish studio apartment in the Abasto area, a few blocks from the house of tango legend Carlos Gardel. The simplicity of his abode confirmed what I'd already suspected: he lives just for music. I even asked younger musicians if his set-up was due to economic difficulties, but they were convinced it was a personal choice.

Although Norris is steeped in jazz, including its extensions into his own land, his music does not sounds derivative, but alive and as new as any improvised music. "If you can connect with musicians who are open, you have an enormous language. It

doesn't matter where you were born," he enthuses. "That's fantastic, each person bringing what they know, what they can, also what they don't know." On our last night we saw the trio perform at the loft-like club Roseti; aside from a lead-off Bobby Bradford tune, they presented all originals. With their keen interplay, crisp and flexible timing, and inventive solos, the playing is as sharp as anywhere.

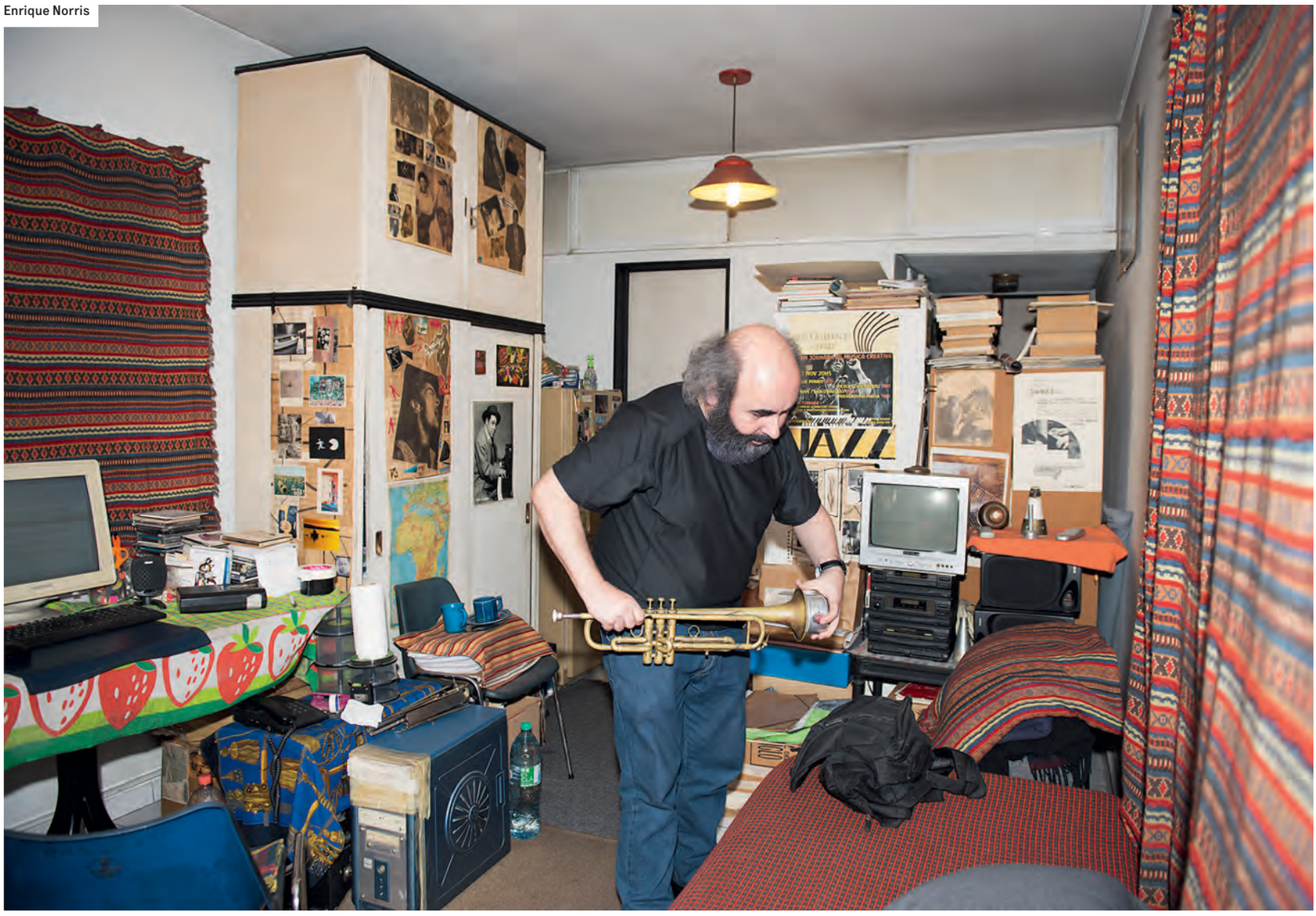
As with many places, improvising musicians in Buenos Aires often end up teaching, which helps to reinforce and broaden certain musical perspectives. For years Norris has taught in the jazz division of the Conservatorio Manuel de Falla; he was also Kaplan's first teacher some 25 years ago, and the trumpeter fondly recalls Norris's zen approach and extended discussions about music. Kaplan, in turn, has a number of amateur and professional adult students. "What I teach, first of all, is technique," he declares. "As a tool for loosening restraints. We never work with the music in front of us. Whatever we play, it's by ear. I want them to listen."

Galante also has private students, as does Conde, but for the past four years they have also been jointly teaching a course in the electronic arts programme at the Universidad Nacional de Tres de Febrero. They do not separate theory and practice. "We're always more concerned with questioning things than with following a certain line of thinking," says Galante. "We try to pass on to them the widest perspective possible. Since we are people who give importance to improvised music, contemporary music, folk music, performance, sound art, somehow we try to give them a sense of all that, and how to resolve specific sound situations."

Though they didn't study much with Norris, pianist Paula Shocron and percussionist Pablo Díaz – partners in their early thirties who got to know each other through him – regard him as a sort of sensei and collaborate with him on several fronts. Shocron, who also teaches at the conservatory, included Norris in her 12-piece large ensemble project Gran Ensamble from 2010, and four years later they performed a splendid duo concert (*Sono-Psico-Cósmica*) at the acclaimed Usina del Arte, a converted electrical power plant in La Boca. Díaz, who teaches at a private music school and works with children's orchestras, is the longtime drummer in the Norris Trio and also features him in his own smart quintet alongside Shocron. His tenure in the trio was Díaz's main education in jazz and free music, and led him to more recent improvisation experiments with Conde and many others, but he started by studying mainstream jazz as a teenager, including with Daniel Piazzolla. "Jazz," he says, "is a music that for us Argentines is from very far away." It therefore requires an extra effort, a cultural leap of faith. "Being born here, living here, the constant contact with cultural questions of the place, Argentine music is more indelible in us than a swing pattern. Like the chacarera rhythm, though I've never played it, ends up being closer somehow. Because it's already there." Perhaps something of that distance might explain how the music always stays distinctive, though there's not much detachment in evidence on the quintet's first record, 2016's *Destemporizador*.

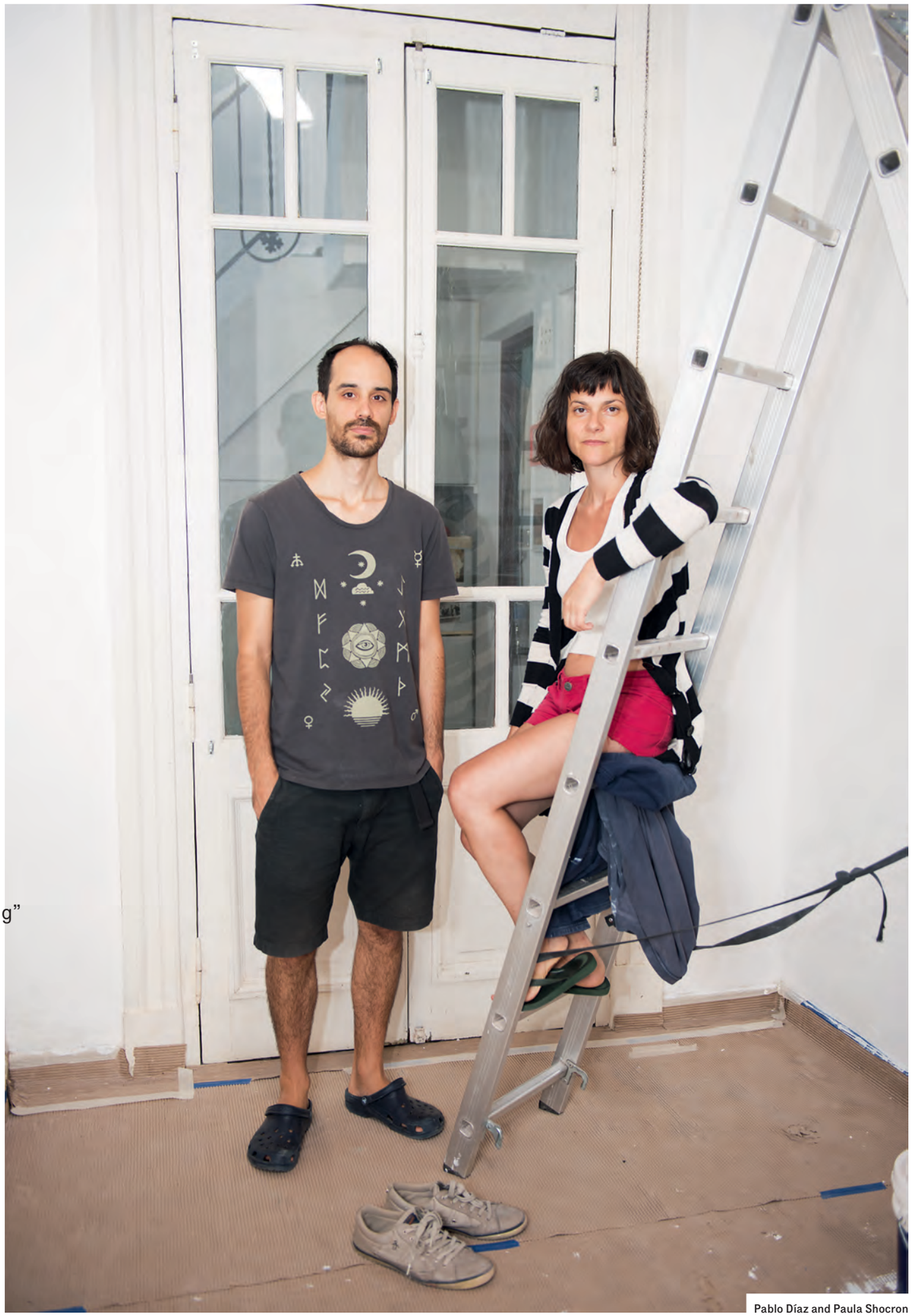
Shocron in contrast was taking piano lessons since the age of five; as something of a prodigy growing up in the provincial city of Rosario, she was surrounded by music in her family, from classical to folk, but the early regimen of recitals and competitions took a physical toll, which led to a parallel activity in dance and movement. Studying composition in her late teens, she also began to explore improvisation on her own. "That was the place I felt I could really be what I was," she remembers. By the time she moved to Buenos Aires in her early twenties and investigated

Enrique Norris



"A music that has to be always moving cannot be always in the same place. It has to be travelling"

Luis Conde



Pablo Díaz and Paula Shocron

the jazz tradition more fully, improvising was already second nature.

Like their older colleagues, Díaz and Shocron maintain a thoroughly open attitude to musical possibilities, seeking at every turn to "erase a bit the dividing lines between styles and disciplines", as she puts it. And in the last few years, they too have begun to travel – to New York each summer, where they were twice hosted under the auspices of percussionist Andrew Drury's Continuum Culture & Arts organisation, and played in his Soup & Sound house concert series; they also played and recorded with Cooper-Moore, William Parker, Daniel Carter and Ras Moshe.

In Buenos Aires the pair are engaged in collective initiatives as well. Creatividad en Movimiento was launched by saxophonist Miguel Crozzoli, but when he moved to Europe, the organisation devolved largely to Díaz and Shocron in order to foster sustainability in the creative arts. In 2016 the group, who are currently seeking to achieve nonprofit status, produced more than 20 interdisciplinary public interventions – duo or trio improvised concerts in parks and squares, often with dance, text or voice – in Buenos Aires and Santa Fe, alongside various educational outreach and cultural exchange initatives. Around the same time, Shocron launched Proyecto IMUDA to explore the relation between music and movement. An ever widening cast of improvising musicians, dancers and other artists have taken part in their events, in Buenos Aires, Rosario and New York, all of it well documented on their YouTube channel.

Tiny musician-run labels are the norm in Buenos Aires, often with minimal packaging. Electric guitarist Subh Das's Jardinista! Recs, with its folded paper covers in a plastic sleeve, has released several titles by Conde in the company of Perales, Galante and others. Zelmar Garín's Noseso Records, which lately graduated to gatefold sleeves, has likewise featured Conde in various outings, from his duo of bass clarinet and contrabass (*Maquinazen*) to his turn in Garín's own free rock band Acido Canario. Noseso has lately joined with a Chilean counterpart and the UK label FMR to co-produce a new project of Conde with guitarist and longtime collaborator Ramiro Molina, a key figure in the improvised music scene in Santiago. Díaz, Shocron and Crozzoli have launched the label Nendo Dango, specifically for their own projects, and have released eight titles in the past year, including their New York exploits. For Norris's Enonane Records, every item is handcrafted and sold mostly at his concerts, including the marvellous madcap *Discado Internacional* by MuniMuni's, his duo with protean multilingual vocalist Barbara Togander.

The last musician I meet on my journey is saxophonist Pablo Ledesma. I first encountered his name over a decade ago, when I read of him playing Lacy's music. In 2000, he gave the first all-Lacy concert in Argentina, in a quartet with Enrique Norris; subsequently, he released the 2007 duo record *Memorial: Steve Lacy* with pianist Pepe Angelillo. These days, he often plays with Kaplan and Mono Hurtado on string bass, who comes more from folk music and tango, as well as occasional dates with Luis Conde. Another who came from afar, Ledesma grew up way in the interior of the province of Buenos Aires, in Henderson, a town on the pampas, where as a teenager in the early 70s he

Pablo Ledesma

listened to British rock, which led him to Miles and Coltrane. He took up the saxophone while studying in La Plata, around 60 kilometres southeast of Buenos Aires, where he devoted himself completely to academic study and played in the symphony orchestra. But he was also playing jazz, and focused increasingly on improvised music. "Argentina is a very isolated country," he says. "Things always arrive slowly here. I began to hear about improvised music in the 1980s, but here there was nothing like it. So, when Lacy arrived in 1966, it must have had a strong impact, because that didn't exist here."

Ledesma has taught at the conservatory in La Plata for 30 years now, but has toured the UK several times, and also recorded some far-reaching improvised encounters with Spanish pianist Agustí Fernández. Like the others, however faraway he may have felt from the tradition of improvised music, he has made it his own and turned it in new ways.

The primary conundrum for free music in Buenos Aires remains where to play. Improvised music, not being consumer-oriented, tends toward smaller spaces, but in recent years the Buenos Aires city government has cracked down on the modest cultural clubs found in many neighborhoods where a mix of artistic events would be held, regulating them instead on the same terms as larger, single-purpose venues. Many places had to close, while others became more clandestine.

For now, private spaces like homes remain one of the most important contexts for this music's continued evolution. It's common enough in Buenos Aires to hear of a concert by word of mouth and then have to call someone to get the address; or, as with Roseti in the Chacarita district and La Pipa De La Pepa in Recoleta, which both have a Facebook presence, you ring the bell at the street door for someone to come let you in. And concerts in musicians' own apartments and studios continue to thrive. In a dynamic new video shot by Murat in Conde and Galante's place, they can be seen performing with Díaz and Shocron, the upright and the baby grand from Galante's family enjoying a rare dialogue, while people stand along every wall, listening intently. ☐