

# ALAN CHAN JAZZ ORCHESTRA

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(as of 10/10/2014)



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# ALAN CHAN

## Tonal Personality



NEVIN WONG

When the Alan Chan Jazz Orchestra is on the stand at the North Hollywood jazz club Upstairs at Vitello's, distinction is evident from the first downbeat. This isn't standard 4/4 swing in the mold of Count Basie. Compositions that unfold and morph, challenging structures, inventive voicings and ever-changing orchestral colors set this group apart. Chan has given Los Angeles a jazz big band with an utterly unique tonal personality.

Narrative is important to his work, but don't look for a decorative chirp to sing featured numbers. A muted trumpet and mallets on tom toms evoke ancient Beijing in the programmatic "Moving To A New Capital," and "Rancho Calveras" has a spoken text by poet Elaine Cohen.

"I like big-band jazz for the way that I can use all of the things I know to tell a story," the 34-year-old composer and bandleader said. "And the way that soloists have a conversation with the composition."

Chan didn't grow up thinking he would become a jazz composer. Born and raised in Hong Kong, he knew Chinese folk music and was steeped in classical music studies in piano and composition. "I liked Mahler for the way he could tell a story," he explained. Chan didn't discover jazz and big bands until he moved to the U.S. to study at the University of Miami in 1997. He graduated from Miami in 2001 as a music theory and composition major.

Beginning in 2004, Chan studied music composition at University of Southern California, where he graduated in 2008 with a doctoral degree. Shelly Berg, an endowed chair in the jazz studies department at that time, suggested that Chan study jazz composition for a year. Vince Mendoza helped to further sharpen his focus. "He taught me a lot about bringing out my own voice in a piece," said Chan.

A contingent of Chan's band gathered around a table at Typhoon restaurant in Santa Monica after a recent Vitello's gig.

"Alan doesn't dumb his writing down for anyone," trumpeter Michael Stever said.

Chan added, with a grin, "We have great readers and I torture them."

"You have to be reading when you have a rest, because you won't come back in at a standard point," drummer Jamey Tate pointed out.

"And when I play an ensemble part," trombonist Paul Young asserted, "I may be playing it with a trumpeter and saxophonist."

Veteran trumpeter Rick Baptist is the "old man" in the band, known for his studio work and time spent in orchestras led by Bob Florence and Bill Holman. His first night as a sub with the Alan Chan Jazz Orchestra, he knew he was involved in something special.

"I had no idea what the music was," Baptist mused, "but I was very inspired by Alan and his young guys; they're all amazing musicians. The writing was obviously from a legit point of view. But the colors he's able to get out of a big band—I hadn't heard anything like that in a long time."

"Every now and then," Baptist continued, "you'll see a note or a chord that's questionable. But you play it through a second time, and you always say, 'Oh—it really does go there.' I think Alan is bringing a set of sounds that haven't been heard before in an L.A. big band. It's very heady stuff."

The Alan Chan Jazz Orchestra has released an EP, *Rancho Calveras*, and is readying a full album for 2014. Chan also has global aspirations. "I'm exploring possibilities with some people in Hong Kong," he said, "to bring big-band jazz to China. I've accompanied student bands on a tour there, and it's been very encouraging. In some cities they have a real taste for big band jazz." —Kirk Silsbee

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# THE NEW YORK CITY JAZZ RECORD

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*Shrimp Tale*  
Alan Chan Jazz Orchestra  
(Crown Heights Audio Network)  
by George Kanzler

Hong Kong native and California resident Alan Chan doesn't approach the configuration of his Jazz Orchestra the way most big band leaders do. He creates unique soundscapes from melding, mixing and matching various instruments in the familiar reeds, brass and rhythm of his big band. This debut album reveals one of the most distinctive big band architects to come along since Maria Schneider and Darcy James Argue. The music he creates resembles great paintings akin to Monet's gardens or Van Gogh's starry nights or the music of classical impressionists like Ravel or Debussy. Eschewing traditional song structures and conventional time/rhythm, Chan writes evocative tone poems. Some of his voicings and tones are so extraordinary at times you forget you are listening to a jazz big band, yet everything he creates comes from that basic instrumentation and tradition.

Each of the eight tracks on *Shrimp Tale* is indelibly singular. The opener, "Isu Zu Ku (To Be Continued)", was inspired by Chan's bicycle rides in New York, the piece united by a click-like bike pedal rhythm as pointillist passages flit by from various ensemble voicings. Guest trumpeter Wayne Bergeron soars in the heroic toreador role on the title track, a reminiscence of Chan's time in Miami, mashing up salsa and a heavy dance groove with humor and wit in dazzling orchestral combinations. Diaphanous tonal colors pervade "A Spirit's Dream", a rhapsodic piece inspired by Chinese brush strokes on a painting of a female figure. "Moving To A New Capital", the longest track and album centerpiece, is a portrait of Beijing, which begins with a traditional Japanese Gagaku flute and tom tom melody, then evokes the teeming modern metropolis with rousing riffs and even a suggestion of honky-tonk tenor sax. Two tracks are musical settings for poems about Mexico by Elaine Cohen, one melodramatic, the other bright and mariachi perky. The Mexican influence is also paramount on the closing track, "Rancho Calaveras", a swing-band inspired Tex-Mex polka enlivened by clarinet and banjo solos and a rousing march climax.

For more information, visit [alanchanmusic.com](http://alanchanmusic.com). This project is at ShapeShifter Lab Aug. 4th. See Calendar.

## ALAN CHAN JAZZ ORCHESTRA SHRIMP TALE

*"Shrimp Tale...affirms Chan's status as a world-class composer/arranger who employs effectively every voice at his disposal."* —Jack Bowens (AFI)

alanchanjazzorchestra.com

**CD Release Party – a Gowanus Story**  
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ShapeShifter Lab | 18 Whitwell Place, Brooklyn, NY  
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ACJ's debut album *SHRIMP TALE* was recorded with 20 of the top 100 *Los Angeles* musicians in 2013. Yet Alan's creativity for big band music began in Brooklyn in the last 5 years of his Gowanus studio, where many of his genre-busting tunes were composed. To celebrate this occasion, Alan is forming his East Coast band for the first time, right in his beloved Brooklyn neighborhood!

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## ALAN CHAN JAZZ ORCHESTRA



### SHAPESHIFTER LAB / AUGUST 4

Prepare to be surprised. This big band may boast a familiar template of brass, reeds and rhythm but it doesn't deliver the sounds you'd expect. Hong Kong-raised Alan Chan creates a palette distinctive from almost all other similar outfits using the same basic instrumentation. His music is impressionistic, his tonal colors unique. Tunes progress as a narrative or panorama rather than in any usual song form.

This is the East Coast debut of the music from the orchestra's first album, *Shrimp Tale* (Crown Heights Audio Network), featuring compositions inspired by Chan's cultural interests and travels. "Moving to a New Capital" begins with traditional Japanese folk music and then portrays the teeming cauldron of Beijing today. "Rancho Calaveras" is a Tex-Mex polka channeled through big band swing.

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CD/LP/Track Review

# Shrimp Tale



66 RECOMMEND IT!

## Alan Chan: Shrimp Tale (2014)

By [JACK BOWERS](#), Published: July 1, 2014 | 2,312 views

Big bands these days are being taken in many directions, one of which is eastward. [Alan Chan](#), born and raised in Hong Kong and educated in part in the U.S. (at the universities of Miami and Southern California), has deftly blended Asian tradition with American jazz on *Shrimp Tale*, the splendid debut recording by his three-year-old Los Angeles-based orchestra. Growing up in Hong Kong, Chan says, he was exposed mainly to classical and Chinese folk music, from which he drew his early inspiration. It was while studying classical composition at USC that he met and was encouraged by faculty members [Shelly Berg](#) and [Vince Mendoza](#) to consider jazz as a possible avenue for his talents. In 2008, Chan became a member of the BMI Jazz Composers Workshop in New York, where he honed his composing skills under the tutelage of [Jim McNeely](#) and others. The result is *Shrimp Tale*, whose title recalls Chan's time in Miami studying jazz arranging with [Gary Lindsay](#).



That's as good a place as any to start, as "Shrimp Tale," an irresistible theme set to a saucy salsa beat, not only ushers in the high-flying trumpet of guest soloist [Wayne Bergeron](#) but affirms Chan's status as a world-class composer / arranger who employs effectively every voice at his disposal, from piccolo, flute, clarinet and banjo to spoken narration (Lauren Marks, "Monte Alban," "Solita") and even a children's chorus (Darla and Zane Driskill, "Rancho Calaveras"). Elsewhere, the mood ranges from light-hearted ("Tsu Zu Ku," which in Japanese means "to be continued") to emphatic ("Moving to a New Capital") and decisive ("Rene's Barcarolle"), each of which exemplifies Chan's inclusive perspective.

The picturesque "Monte Alban" and sunny "Solita" pay homage to poet / artist Elaine Cohen, whose verses, spoken by Marks, are nestled beneath the wide canopy of Chan's genial music, while the "children's chorus" serves to further energize the lively hoedown-leaning finale, "Rancho Calaveras," whose instrumental soloists are clarinetist [Vince Trombetta](#), trumpeter [Michael Stever](#) and guitarist Andrew Synowiec (on banjo). Aside from that trio and Bergeron, articulate spokesmen who lend voice to the enterprise include saxophonists [Kevin Garren](#), [Jeff Driskill](#), [Tom Luer](#) and [Ken Fisher](#), trombonists Paul Young and [Andy Martin](#), pianist [Andy Langham](#) and drummer [Jamey Tate](#). The ensemble, for its part, is letter-perfect, as one would expect from a squadron of southern California's most accomplished musicians.

Even though there are occasional glimpses of the Far East on *Shrimp Tale*, Chan never dwells there for more than a moment or two, preferring instead to focus his energy and compositional skills on time-honored American jazz. In doing so, he has produced an album that should gladden almost anyone's taste.

Track Listing: Tsu Zu Ku; Shrimp Tale; A Spirit's Dream; Moving to a New Capital; Monte Alban; Solita; Rene's Barcarolle; Rancho Calaveras.

Personnel: Alan Chan: composer, arranger; Rob Schaer: trumpet; Rick Baptist: trumpet; Tony Bonsera: trumpet; Michael Stever: trumpet; Kevin Garren, Alex Budman, Tom Luer, Jeff Driskill (2, 3, 5), Vince Trombetta (1-4, 6-8), Ken Fisher: saxophones; Andy Martin: trombone (1-4, 6-8); Charlie Morillas: trombone; Dave Ryan: trombone (2, 3, 5); Paul Young: trombone; Steve Hughes: trombone; Andrew Synowiec: guitar, banjo; Andy Langham: piano; David Hughes: bass; Jamey Tate: drums; Lauren Marks: narrator (4, 5); Darla Driskill, Zane Driskill: children's chorus (8). Special Guest — Wayne Bergeron: trumpet (2).

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CD/LP/Track Review

## Shrimp Tale



83 RECOMMEND IT!

### Alan Chan Jazz Orchestra: Shrimp Tale (2014)

By DAN BILAWSKY, Published: July 7, 2014 | 1,981 views

Light flourishes, grand pronouncements, fleeting and flitting figures, sudden shifts in mood, and wide emotional arcs are part and parcel of the music created by the Alan Chan Jazz Orchestra.

Chan, a classically trained pianist who came up in Hong Kong, hopped all over the United States while honing his writing skills. He studied jazz arranging as an undergraduate at the University of Miami, acquired a master's degree in composition at the University of Missouri-Kansas City, did his doctoral work at the University of Southern California, and sharpened his pen as a member of the BMI Jazz Composers Workshop in New York City. Through those varied situations, he received guidance, advice and encouragement from some superb writers, including [Gary Lindsay](#), [Shelly Berg](#), [Vince Mendoza](#), and [Jim McNeely](#). The work of each of those men has rubbed off on Chan, yet his writing doesn't ape their respective styles; he's quickly established his own voice, and it's one worth taking note of.



*Rancho Calaveras* (Crown Heights Audio Network, 2013)—an EP that featured three pieces—helped Chan gain some traction with the jazz press, and *Shrimp Tale* fulfills the promise hinted at on that eighteen-minute long release. Those three previously released numbers and five other winners fill out the first full length release from this Los Angeles-based band. The music has a way of balancing reverence and revelry, positivity and pathos, and gusto and gentility. Quick, clever, and well-executed shifts in mood, meter, and musical language define Chan's work. One piece might tap into ancient Japanese traditions, shift its view to modern day China, and throw in a bluesy episode before heading back to olden days ("Moving To A New Capital"); another may cook and burn, as salsa works its way into the picture and guest trumpeter [Wayne Bergeron](#) flies high; and others may celebrate the connective relationship(s) between words and music, as Lauren Marks brings poet Elaine Cohen's text to life while Chan paints with dark ("Monte Alban") and light ("Solita") colors.

While Chan's writing is the star, his orchestra has no shortage of compelling solo voices. [Kevin Garren](#)'s soprano saxophone provides rays of sunshine, trumpeter [Michael Stever](#) makes his mark on a few occasions, and [Tom Luer](#)'s tenor is the heart of the sweeping "Rene's Barcarolle." More than ten different top-notch players in the group get to stand in the spotlight at one time or another.

It's hard to believe this band, founded in 2011, was still basically in its infancy when it recorded this album in 2013. The Alan Chan Jazz Orchestra is a well-oiled machine, and one that moves and acts like no other.

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Record Label: Crown Heights Audio Network

Style: [Big Band](#)

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