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SATURDAY 20<sup>TH</sup> & SUNDAY 21<sup>ST</sup>  
NOVEMBER 2010  
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10/06/10 • [By Lee Mergner](#)

## Kenny Werner: A Musical Expression of Grief

### Jazz pianist creates masterpiece inspired by the tragic death of his teenaged daughter

On October 2, 2006, Katheryn Werner, the 16-year-old daughter of pianist Kenny Werner and his wife Lorraine, was driving home from her martial arts class not far from their home in upstate New York. The young woman was killed when the car overturned on a nearby road. That's a story with a tragic end. But for the pianist and his wife, it had to be the beginning of a new story, based on musical expression, collaboration with trusted friends and a strengthened marital bond.



## Kenny Werner

A new album by Werner, *No Beginning, No End*, has been released on Half Note Records and features music inspired by that tragic accident. Werner wrote the large-scale work for voice, choir, wind ensemble, saxophone and jazz rhythm section and used his close friends—saxophonist Joe Lovano and his wife singer Judi Silvano—as pivotal voices in the music’s production. Werner received a prestigious Guggenheim Fellowship award for Music Composition for *No Beginning, No End* and has hopes to present the suite live in a concert hall setting, appropriate to its sweep and grandeur. It is arguably the most creatively ambitious project of Werner’s life and in the end its creation helped heal at least some of the wounds caused by that terribly traumatic time in his family’s life.

## Writing to Understanding

Although this piece of music was written in the wake of the tragedy, the initial assignment to write a large work had come much earlier. “I got the commission almost a year earlier,” says Werner. “It was simply to write a piece commemorating the 80th birthday of a major supporter of MIT’s arts programs, Bradford Endicott. My plan was to work on it in the fall because I also had a heavy playing schedule throughout the summer. And then in the fall, all this happened. It was left dormant because I couldn’t even think about it.”

The turning point came when Werner and his wife went to get away from their New York home and its memories, in the hope of some sort of rejuvenation or renewal. Several months after the accident, some friends had given the couple an oceanside condo in Puerto Rico to stay for a few weeks and somehow recollect themselves. Naturally, it wasn’t so simple. “It was the first time we were alone,” he recalls. “Suddenly it hit us like a ton of a bricks, all over again, because we had had people all around us all the time until then. The first week we just slept. Every time we’d lift our heads, we’d see the ocean out there and our heads would fall back on the pillow. I’m not sure we even ate too much. We sat down on the couches and it was three or four days later when we finally got up. We were having a real hard time being

in a vacation place being the only people who weren't vacationing."

Indeed, vacationing, at least of the resort variety, was not really in the cards for Werner and his wife at that time. Yet Werner feels that the couple's spiritual practices enabled them to somehow get beyond their mourning to some sort of stage of, if not acceptance, then action, particularly for the pianist who had music as an outlet of expression. "As time went on, we meditated and chanted and did things that we've been doing for years now. That's when it began to elevate my consciousness. In the middle of this pain, there would be these odd moments of inspiration. Seeing the whole thing in a different way. And in one of those moments, I wrote the poem 'No Beginning, No End.' And that's when it all unfolded for me. I would write lyrics based on some of the words in that poem, I'd have Judi sing it, because it was already a commission featuring Joe. And I would make her be the root or the *Sa*, as they say in Indian music, or the pedal, what I think of as the truth. And everything else would swirl around it. That's how I got the template for the piece. The most sedate factor is Judi and everything else is moving emotionally or violently and that's how it all unfolded."

In listening to the very powerful music, one can't help but hear that the vocal passages are offset by a singular voice of a different kind—the saxophone of Joe Lovano, whose playing is both powerful and expressive throughout. "He can't be anything but expressive," states Werner. "The great thing about writing for Joe Lovano is that I know his playing so well as a result of our collaboration since around 1970. Parts of those things particularly in the third and fourth movements are almost all written, but they still sound just like Joe playing. The reason they had to be written is that they intersect with the composition. You don't feel a tempo, you just feel like a wind is blowing. He lands where they land. In order for that to happen, I had to write specifically what I wanted, but I still wanted it to sound like him. As easy as he makes it sound, it was actually quite tricky to play these complicated lines and land where he's supposed to land, without a conductor. He played so expressive, that you can't tell that (a) it's difficult, and (b) it's not just him blowing. Which is exactly the effect I wanted."

Because he hadn't made much progress on the earlier commission and because he was unable to really focus on writing in the immediate aftermath of the accident, Werner had very little time to create this large work, which shifted from focusing on an MIT professor to dealing with his daughter's sudden death. "Once I decided that this is the piece I was going to do, I had basically a month to write a piece I had been commissioned to do a year ago," he says. "Out of necessity, I was pretty much writing day and night. If I was doing a gig, I would go back to my hotel room and write. There was no other option. And it was quite raw, because I was giving it to Fred Harris the conductor and he was trying to figure it out. There was no time to contemplate. I knew what I wanted."

Things moved quickly once he set pen to paper, as much by necessity as anything, but that had its own reward. "I just had to get a raw version of it out," Werner says. "I started writing in late February and they had to start rehearsing sometime in March. A raw version of this piece was done on May 6 or May 7. The mere fact that I was writing day and night kind of brought me out of my dark place. Of course it was cathartic. I think it was mostly cathartic to hear it at the concert at MIT. Then it all came together. Even in its raw form people were stunned by the piece and really affected by the piece and not just the reason for it, but it's probably the most powerful music I've ever written, just as music."

## Going on Record

Shortly after the concert, Werner played the music from the performance for Jeff Levenson, the longtime jazz industry exec and head of the Half Note Records label. Most of the projects on that label are live recordings from the NYC Blue Note club, with which the label is associated. Nonetheless, Levenson took

the creative and business leap and agreed to record the project, which promised to be the largest in scope and logistics in the label's history. "The composition he did struck me as very large and significant," explains Levenson, "coupled with the fact that it was born out of this most human of tragedies, the death of his daughter. So I either bravely or foolishly said that, 'We have to do this, we have to figure out a way to do this.' And that's how the recording began."

Indeed the project's scope provided a tremendous challenge to the small label and its resources. "It was an unwieldy beast keeping in mind that the budgets we normally work with do not allow us to do master projects involving 100 musicians." The project benefited from the help of two more allies of Werner—Dave Schroeder, head of the jazz program at New York University, where Werner is also an adjunct professor, and Rich Shemaria, a composer, arranger and educator, also at NYU. Schroeder and Shemaria enlisted the help of students, faculty and musicians from all over the city to help make up the large ensemble, which included a 37-piece wind ensemble, string quartet, vocal choir and various instrumentalists. "They started calling people and inviting musicians to participate in this project, calling in favors," explains Levenson. "Out of the universe of musicians in New York, including kids who attend Julliard, Manhattan School of Music or NYU, some pros and amateurs, we assembled the cast of characters to perform Kenny's music." In addition, Schroeder arranged to record the project at NYU's Frederic Lowe Theater, in order to capture the large and complex sound of this huge ensemble of musicians.

Apparently there were many factors involved in getting a community to come together to support Werner, including genuine respect for the work and its creator. But Levenson also sees the original inspiration for the piece as a critical factor in bringing people together. "The most noteworthy aspect of that part of the process was that everyone felt empathetic with the story. They understood that this was a project born out of great great tragedy and they wanted to participate. So the issue of money was fundamentally a non-issue. We were able to get people to really volunteer themselves in the service to getting this music recorded. And that extends to the musicians, the engineers, the filmmaker and everyone else who worked for either no bread or very modest bread to make it all happen."

Further illustrating the community and family elements of this project, the album was recorded and mixed by the noted jazz recording engineer Paul Wickliffe, head of Skyline Productions, and who also has a close longtime relationship with the pianist. Wickliffe is married to singer Roseanna Vitro, who has performed and recorded with Werner, and the couple were like aunt and uncle to Werner's daughter.

## **A Different Way of Playing**

For Werner, the author of several musical instruction books and a learning system called *Effortless Mastery*, the music is always greatest when it unfolds naturally and organically by getting inside the piece. "There's a level where you go beyond playing it well, it plays itself. Once it plays itself, it comes to life. And for me, that's where music begins. It's not an option or a peak moment, that's where it must begin."

Werner is known as a great piano player, yet in this work, arguably his most affecting, Kenny Werner the piano player is not the focus for the piece. If you're looking for pianistic chops, you'll want to check out some other recording. Werner recognizes that shift and believes it reflects his own growth as a creative musician. "I had been moving in that direction. That showing off of chops is so meaningless to me that I'm afraid I've been going more in the other direction. Even in my quintet records, people have said to me, 'Jeez, you don't dominate it' and that's because I'm more interested in the environment for the music. I share Miles' vision of being more into the environment that you created and the mystique of that environment than in focusing on your own playing. I just did a solo record that will be out soon, coming out in France, and the whole record is like that. I was surprised. I had some virtuosic stuff I recorded but when it

came time to pick the cuts, I didn't pick any of it. Instead I just picked stuff that just had this inner connection and I don't know whether that's a progressive thing, but all I know is that, in general, that kind of inner connection has all the meaning. That whole proving ground has zero meaning to me."

Lately entering a zone beyond that competitive and demonstrative proving ground, Werner considers Herbie Hancock an effective role model for playing the piano. "Herbie is like Frank Sinatra to me," Werner says emphatically. "I appreciate him more as I get older. His recent stuff is so wise, it's like the very Zen philosophy he subscribes to. Sometimes, hearing him play solo piano is like watching a few leaves blow. Talk about someone that's completely unconcerned with technique and showing off, but rather with just allowing the current of life to flow through him and manifest in music. That sure describes Herbie and Wayne Shorter. I was talking with Chris Potter about this. Both of us could not conceal our amazement over what Wayne does with a few notes. We both know that no matter fast we can play we cannot get close to that level of wisdom. With Herbie, I just think to myself when I hear him, you just have to be 70 to play like that."

As great a work as this album seems, it clearly is not something that could be easily duplicated live, what with the choir, string section, distinctive sax and so on. Or could it? "It is possible to perform it live. We're going to try and find the proper venue. It's easier to do it locally because there's a whole choir that's already learned it and a whole wind ensemble that already learned it. And the string quartet could also make it. We are going to propose it for other places, but it may have to be on a classical program as just the wind piece or various school programs if they wanted to motivate their choir and their wind ensemble. But in New York, I hope we do it in a major way. There we could do it all. To me that is a concert. You start with the wind ensemble piece, then you go to the choir, then the string quartet and then the coda. If we needed another set, perhaps Joe and I could play some duets."

Listening to the opening section can be tough going if you know the back-story. Werner confirms that its intensity is a direct reflection of the accident and its effect. "Yes," says Werner. "The way Joe, Judi and I are improvising at the very beginning is sort of a high, active, light-filled space. She [his daughter Kathryn] was in a very inspired state that day. The place where we do our spiritual practices, she got to spend time there every day. She was flying." In a moment that he can never and will never forget, Werner talked by phone from California with his daughter that day. And thankfully, it was neither a negative nor a superficial conversation. "I had a rare privilege of talking to my daughter the morning of that day," he recalls, fondly. "She was telling me all this good stuff that was going on. And I finally got quiet and said, 'You know, this is what I envisioned for you when we moved up here [upstate New York].' She just quietly went, 'Thank you, Dad.' Those were the last words she ever said to me. That was very complete in our terms of communication."

Werner says that her mental and emotional state that day set the tone for the beginning of the piece, which goes from flighty to intense to contemplative in a short span. "That state she was in...she was buzzing. That's what I tried to create in the first part. The next thing that happens is the accident. For Joe's playing, rather than musical markers on my piece, I put emotional prompting there, like a script for an actor. On Joe's piece, it said, 'After you hear this explosion, you've thrust into a web of angels and you're confused.' That was Joe's instruction. From there it settles down and that's where a guide takes Kathryn's hands and begins to explain to her the universe and death, transition and life. The first movement is very much about that wisdom. You know, sometimes they say you should tell a story with a piece. I've never been much for that. I kind of write from chaos and then I keep removing things until it sounds like there's a story. This time I was telling a story. There's no question about it."

## Setting A New Standard

As the father of a teenaged daughter, talking with Werner was no easy task. After all, there is something rather special about the relationship between a father and daughter. Freudian psychology aside, it's not something anyone can easily explain. "I know it's historically like that—father-daughter and mother-son," Werner says. "I don't know why either. But it certainly worked that way in my family. The piece is very special for two reasons. One is the story that prompted the piece and the other thing is that it's the strongest piece of art I've ever created. It sets a new standard for me."

Werner is clear that his new standard is about more than writing tunes to blow over or even reinventing jazz standards. "It's always been one of my goals to get away from an art form and get it so personal that it's just your own inner urge, to quote Joe Henderson. I think I've been getting closer to that all my life. The closer I get to it, the more powerful my music is, not in cultural terms, but in emotional terms for the people who listen. This one went way beyond that. We have to see where I go next."

But where does he go? Creating a major work like this begs the question for just about any artist: Where do you go from here? In the case of Werner, he has created a masterpiece of composition based on the deepest and most traumatic event of his life. How does he move on musically from that? "To tell you the truth, the thought of retirement has been half-kidding and half-not," he says, chuckling. "The half-kidding is because that's how I make my living. The half-not-kidding is that I'd be totally happy to recluse at this point and just study, instead of perform. All of my favorite musicians are more enthusiastic about what they're studying, than by what they're performing. Because it's the constant growth that makes you feel young. I'm not conscious of age because every time I can do something new on the piano that I couldn't do before, I get that same kick I had when I was twenty and that happened. It's the same thing with writing. The place where I have the most space to grow is in the technical ability of orchestrating. To me that's more of a technical expertise than it is just expression. That's where I need the most amount of work. I'd be happy to spend the rest of my life trying to write orchestration of my own pieces on a higher and higher level"

Inspiring her father to write more sophisticated and intricate music is one of Kathryn Werner's legacies. But finding a theme or focus will no doubt be a challenge as it would be for any father who has lost a daughter. Regardless, Werner knows that he wants to do more now than play standards. "That's where I wanted to go originally, but I got way sidetracked. The fact is: I will have to go on. Where do I go from here? I actually have a commission to write a concerto for piano and saxophone for a Danish orchestra in 2011. It won't go anywhere near emotionally where it was, but I have to find a new topic and I have to be generally interested in the topic. That's what different. I don't want to make a piece of jazz or a piece of classical music. I don't even want to make a piece of art. I just want to express something that has actual meaning for me as a human being. I know I have to go that way from now on. You cannot go back from there."

For his part, Levenson prefers to accept the magnitude of the work in hand and not be too concerned about what Werner will do next. "The thing that captures my imagination is not so much where he goes from here, but what this project represents," says Levenson. "He's always been regarded by musicians as a very advanced player and conceptualizer and thinker. He's kind of the musician's musician, a guy who operates on an extremely high level of authority among his peers. Here, confronted with the creative challenge of how to repair himself emotionally, he creates what many people consider to be a masterwork. Those people in my immediate circle include Dave Liebman, Lee Konitz, Maria Schneider, Gil Goldstein and Randy Brecker, and all of whom have weighed in and heralded this piece as a significant creative milestone for Kenny and for us all. I don't know where Kenny goes from here, other than that he has now been tested and he's obviously risen to the challenge. He has made this great leap from piano player to composer. The nature of the work he composed is extremely serious and it represents a hybrid of sorts. It's a symphonic

work that utilizes jazz.”

Indeed, Levenson says that the project’s hybrid nature creates problems both good and bad for Half Note as marketers of the recording. “I submitted it for Grammy consideration in 22 categories and that alone underscored the challenge involved in marketing or selling this thing, but also as far categorizing it. It’s symphonic, it’s classical, it’s jazz, it’s composed, it’s improvised. It’s a work that defies easy categorization and discussion. That’s a wonderful challenge for us to have, but at the same time it makes it a little difficult for people to absorb the magnitude of it because it’s so different.”

### **A Daughter’s Legacy**

Still very much a proud father, Werner doesn’t hesitate for a second when asked to talk about his daughter and her unique qualities. It seems that the apple didn’t fall too far from the creative tree in this case. “She had started on piano, but she was playing guitar. She had been writing songs for awhile, but her songs were just starting to get really good. She’s got influences from early Joni Mitchell. Her early records were among my wife’s and my favorite music. She is a bigger influence on me than most jazz musicians, in fact.”

According to Werner, music was just one facet of this gifted young woman, who at a young age seemed to embody a deeper level of understanding. “She was also into writing. She had a lot of writings. I don’t know if I’ll ever put them out, but we had gathered them. The wisdom she was gathering already at this age, it also made us to understand why she was ready to go. Because she was expressing stuff that I know that I have had to try to learn all my life. I carried so much baggage to try to undo to learn this wisdom. For her, she didn’t have the baggage. She was already clear. For example, she thought that joy was service. And most kids don’t get to that, but the particular thing [spiritual practice] we follow, we learn that. Of course, I believe that, but I had so much baggage of self-centeredness that you have to peel the onion to get to that pure thought. She was grown into that thought. That’s why I was so happy she was near that wisdom. She was very wise and very articulate.”

Her talents ranged even farther than music and writing. “Her main passion besides music was photography. We still hope to do a show of her photography at some point, but there’s so much to organize. But she really had a great eye and a great imagination for photography. She was a very can-do person. Always helpful. Even when she was in kindergarten, she would try to help the other kids with whatever they were doing. I just wish I could have seen what she could have done with all that talent and decisiveness and not being afraid and genuine concern for other people. She embodied the best elements of us. My wife is the best humanitarian I know. And I am talented and clever. My daughter embodied both of these things. She had beautiful talent, and she was funny, but she had a real commitment to humanity that she got from her mother.”

Losing a child is perhaps the single most difficult thing for a marriage, but Werner says that in the case of his wife and himself, it brought them closer in the face of a trauma unimaginable for most parents. “There is a very high percentage of people that divorce after something like this happens. I think the choices are that you lose touch with each other through the grief or the blame or whoever knows why, or you grow closer together than ever and that’s what happened with Lorraine and I. We share a bond that we’ll never share with anybody else: the creation of this child, the co-loving of this child and the loss of this child. I see her [his wife] now like I used to see my daughter. Anything that will make her life happy is what I’m committed to doing. We formed a stronger bond than ever fortunately.”

Perhaps what is most incredible is Werner’s contention that his eventual acceptance of the tragedy and loss wasn’t so unique or exceptional. “Everybody says, ‘I can’t imagine how you got through it.’ But you, God

forbid, if it had happened to you, would have gotten through it and anybody else would. You just don't know that unless something like that happens to you. It's no heroics of any one person for getting through it. Anybody that has to gets through it. But you would never know that if you didn't have to and, of course, God willing, you will never have to."

After all he had been through emotionally and intellectually, Werner says that seeing the piece performed live had a very deep effect on him. "I was strangely like a spectator. It was almost like I wasn't there and I was looking at the effect of all this. I realized that I'm empty in a good way for the first time in a long time. I've made my expression of grief here. And have, at least for a minute, peace."

We can all hope that this project marks an end to his acute grief and the beginning of a new level of creative composition. That would be a story worth reading and hearing. In the meantime, we can see much of this project on film, thanks to serendipitous involvement by Soren Jensen. The Danish filmmaker initially planned to shoot a documentary film about Werner and his teaching methods, but shifted to focus on *No Beginning, No End*. He filmed Werner throughout much of the recording and performing stages of this recording and did interviews as well. You can preview [footage here](#) and learn more about the entire project.

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Lee Mergner is currently the Editor-in-Chief of JazzTimes magazine. He also contributes reviews, columns, news features and profiles to the magazine and oversees the magazine's annual industry directories..

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