

Stan Kiffian



## Stan Killian

### *Unified*

SUNNYSIDE 1282

★★★

Stan Killian has the air of a great thinker, and on *Unified*, his intellectual nature is reflected in both his compositions and carefully shaped solos.

On the opening track, “Twin Dark Mirrors,” Killian’s reedy tenor improvisation begins slowly, almost hesitantly. The solo evolves into a few sixteenth-note runs, but Killian never really breaks into the torrential note downpour that lies just under his fingers.

There are the occasional bursts of speed through thickets of notes, but Killian is mostly a contemplative improviser. His musical personality is a foil to his guest artists: David Binney, Roy Hargrove and Jeremy Pelt, who unleash fireworks. But even through



all the exciting playing, Killian commands attention. Compositionally (all but one of the tunes are his), Killian thinks about the direction of the tunes, laying out multiple melodic ideas. His best numbers are uptempo compositions, and he seems to have more fun with melodies full of interval leaps. Pianist Benito Gonzalez shows off his own compositional skills on “Elvin’s Sight.” His horn writing is economical, and he teases out a simple melody that floats above a busy piano accompaniment.

*Unified* is not a flashy record; it shows a saxophonist forming his own identity—thoughtful and contemplative, but just combative enough to keep you listening. —Jon Ross

**Unified:** Twin Dark Mirrors; Elvin’s Sight; Unified; Center; Isosceles; Window Of Time; Eternal Return. (53:15)

**Personnel:** Stan Killian, tenor saxophone; Benito Gonzalez, piano; Corcoran Holt, Bryan Copeland, bass; Darrell Green, McClenty Hunter, drums; Roy Hargrove, Jeremy Pelt, trumpet; David Binney, alto saxophone.

**Ordering info:** [sunnysiderecords.com](http://sunnysiderecords.com)

## 05/03/11 By Brian Zimmerman Album Review: Stan Killian "Unified"

# JazzTimes®

Stan Killian, the Houston-born, New York-based saxophonist offers a stunning new CD with *Unified*, his new studio album from Sunnyside Records. On this album, Killian and his quartet are joined by special guests Roy Hargrove, Jeremy Pelt, and David Binney, all of whom add a brooding yet dynamic quality to the music. The songs on this album vividly depict the stylistic range of Killian’s playing, providing a broad swath of styles ranging from pensive and lyrical to grinding and percussive.

The album opens with “Twin Dark Mirrors,” one of Killian’s deeply compelling original compositions. The song begins with a somber, almost spiritual introduction, then breaks swiftly into a bright, straight-ahead melody featuring Roy Hargrove on trumpet. Killian’s solo on “Twin Dark Mirrors” demonstrates the young sax player’s intelligent compositional mind. His playing creates a perfect blend of styles that recall the full-bodied tone of Coleman Hawkins and the intimate riffs of Ben Webster. On “Elvin’s Sight,” Killian’s rhythm section lays down a funky, post-bop groove over which Killian’s calm and meditative melody floats like a thick cloud of smoke. “Unified,” the album’s title track, evokes laid-back and relaxed feel that hums with coolness and finesse. The song is made even cooler with the addition of David Binney’s enchanting alto-sax lines. “Center,” a pulsing original song featuring Jeremy Pelt on trumpet, highlights the brilliant minimalism of Killian’s rhythm section. Drummer Mac Hunter provides a beautiful canvas on which bassist Corcoran Holt and pianist Benito Gonzalez are free to project their sparse yet vibrant coloration. “Isosceles” is a dizzying whirlwind of a tune, one whose unburdened harmonies allow Killian to showcase his stunning improvisational chops. “Window of Time” features a graceful, winding saxophone melody alongside a hip and compelling bass-line. The album winds down with “Eternal Return,” an intense and forceful tune comprising a sparse rhythmic groove and punchy melodic lines.

Killian offers a subtle and nuanced performance on *Unified*. The combination of his pensive improvisations and warm, resonant tone is the perfect match for the inviting melodies of his original tunes. His playing is smart but unpretentious, logical yet unrestrained. That kind of balance is hard to achieve in jazz, and we’ll be lucky if he can keep it up for his next album.

By RAUL D'GAMA ROSE, / Published: June 18, 2011

## Stan Killian: Unified

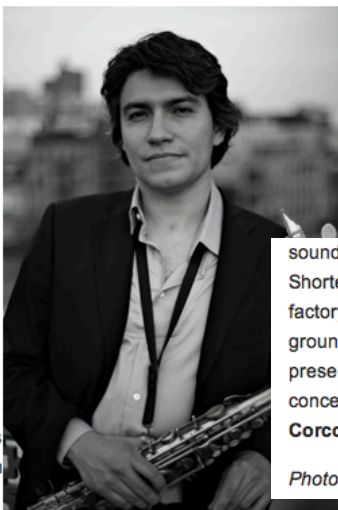
Stan Killian is one of those voices that doesn't make a great deal of noise, especially on *Unified*. His tenor saxophone is by no means a quiet one, but his is a voice filled with a mature gravitas that seems to emerge from a deeper sense of wisdom. His tone is resonant and echoes with mellow grandeur. His colors are rich and reflect the depths to which the tenor saxophone can reach, while still remaining accessible to encompass tender emotions. He plays in long, unbroken lines that weave in and out of lush melodies. This swerving style enables him to bend notes and approach melodic lines with hot harmonics that burn quietly, as the song lines unfurl, sometimes with much surprise. This keeps his entourage on edge and pushes them into reaching deeper into the pocket to come up with magical inventions, which keep the music alive and on edge.

This is not always obvious, but then Killian makes sure that nothing about his groove is obvious. However, it does take time to dawn on the ear. Killian seems to tow the harmonies behind him, leading with warm gushes of melody and a rumbling rhythm that is created by one of two bassists—Corcoran Holt, who has come to be one of the most impressive young exponents of the bass violin, and Bryan Copeland, who makes a strong impression on the tracks where he is featured. The magnificent drum work by Darrell Green and McClenty Hunter complements the stellar turn by the alternating bassists. And then there is also the wonderfully slanted harmony that comes by way of two fine horn men: Roy Hargrove, whose burnished tone brings a glorious glow to any music that he plays; and Jeremy Pelt, who is also fast becoming one of the more recognizable voices on the trumpet. And, of course, there is the mighty alto wail of David Binney, whose sharp and shredding voice brings much of this music to life.

Killian's music is a rich alchemy of abstract musical geometry and a concrete sense of the vivid narrative line that makes his muscular stories or musical paradigms accessible and even understood. But he also enlivens the music with a broad sense of wonder, as well as generous helpings of magic and mystery. "Twin Dark Mirrors" features some ghostly imagery that arises from the glow of Hargrove's magical horn and the quiet fire of Killian's breathtaking tenor. "Unified," "Center" and "Isosceles" create exquisite abstractions from which Killian and the ensemble forge gorgeous melodies entwined with utterly beautiful harmonies. "Window of Time" and "Eternal Return" reveals the composer's metaphysical side with their brooding, loping lines that only meet at melodic infinity. "Elvin's Sight" is the only chart not written by Killian, but by the brilliant Venezuelan pianist/cohort Benito Gonzalez; still, it fits this program well as it has hidden angles that demand inventive probing. All of this is done with aplomb on an album that grows in stature with every hearing.

### Thursday, May 19

Some observers will tell you they can't understand why the younger generation isn't chomping at the bit to completely ditch the "straightahead, traditional" sounds they grew up with (and that in many cases their parents grew up with). This writer, however, thinks it'll be a sad day when upstart young kids lose interest in hard swing rhythms and lyrical, bluesy melodies. That's why **Stan Killian** sounds a hopeful note for jazz's future. The 32-year-old from outside San Antonio is a proud banner-carrier of the "Texas tenor" tradition, although in his case it's more about the bravura of that tradition and less about the sound itself. Killian is more precisely of the Dexter Gordon



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sound that carried through in Sonny Rollins, John Coltrane, and Wayne Shorter. Killian's debut album, *Unified*, is the stuff of the 1960s Blue Note factory: hard bop that's branching out into bossa nova, the New Thing, and groundbreaking harmonic language. It's great stuff that brings the past into the present, like any good jazz does, and Killian is celebrating the release with a concert in D.C. that includes Washington expats **Benito Gonzalez** (piano) and **Corcoran Holt** (bass). They hit at 8 p.m. at Twins, 1344 U St. NW. \$10.

Photo: Kat Kojic



## Stan Killian - Unified

Texas-born turned New York-based tenor saxophonist Stan Killian has recently released “Unified” on Sunnyside Records. Killian has composed all of the tunes here except one penned by pianist Benito Gonzalez. Gonzalez and Killian are the single constant pairing in the recording where they are joined by a host of talented musicians who make up the various combinations of his ensemble. The two are joined by Corcoran Holt and Bryan Copeland on bass. Darrell Green and McClenty Hunter take turns on drums. Roy Hargrove and Jeremy Pelt make appearances on trumpet. Lastly but certainly not least, David Binney plays alto saxophone. The opening cut Twin Dark Mirrors features Roy Hargrove taking the first solo following the introduction and melody played by both horn players. Killian’s solo comes second, starting off slowly and gradually gaining momentum. Killian’s tone has been compared with the legendary “Texas Tenor” sound and descriptors such as “muscular” and “big-toned” have been used by others as well. His tone is full on this opening cut, yet not overly bold. He leaves space for Hargrove’s trumpet rather than commanding the ear pay attention to only him. The Latin-tinged Elvin’s Sight finds Killian joined by alto saxophonist David Binney. Binney displays his remarkable technique on the alto, which is then countered by Killian’s own flowing tenor lines. Benito Gonzalez confidently attacks the piano while drummer Darrell Green lays down a robust Afro-Cuban groove with bassist Bryan Copeland. The fade out reveals the breathy subtines of both Killian and Binney right up until the final sound is heard. The title cut Unified is very subtle in nature. Binney and Killian state the sweet yet straining melody then lead into an improvised conversation between the two saxophones. It seems as though Binney and Killian are quite familiar and sensitive to one another’s musical space as they furiously push on with cascading lines. The song tapers off just as it began with Binney and Killian sharing the spotlight on alto and tenor. Trumpeter Jeremy Pelt solos first on the 5/4-based upbeat Center. Pelt creates a solo, which flows beautifully over the odd time – never sounding contrived. As with Pelt’s solo, Killian and Gonzalez weave through the 5/4 solo sections as though it were just another medium swing tune in conventional form. The last minute and a half of the pulsating Center features some very captivating improvisational interplay from the entire ensemble eventually fading to nothing.

The melodic repetition of Isosceles initially sounds as though the record may be skipping, but it quickly modulates to reveal the truth. Almost without warning, Stan Killian launches into a ferocious solo at a very ambitious tempo. He quickly reveals that he can play tempos others may not attempt. Roy Hargrove returns on trumpet to solo following Killian and Gonzalez solos rhythmically first and then launches into an enviable barrage of runs up and down the keys. Darrell Green has the final solo spot on the drums before the ensemble returns to the melody and some impressive dynamics within. Window of Time once again features Binney on alto and his blistering runs joining Killian’s tenor. Green also has a chance to stretch a bit on the drums prior to another trading sparring session between Killian and Binney. The final cut, Eternal Return sees the return of Pelt on trumpet alongside Killian’s tenor. The solo order is Killian, Pelt and then Gonzalez. As done so well before, Killian allows ample room to trade between the soloists. This time it is Pelt who deftly spars with Killian before the final chorus. Stan Killian has a wonderful, full and strong tenor saxophone voice. However, I can’t say that I hear the “Texas Tenor” sound on “Unified” more than I hear the influence of Trane, Mobley, Griffin, Getz or a host of others. It is clear that Stan Killian has a unique voice in a jazz economy filled with wannabes, copycats and frankly lesser players. Killian displays technique, sound and sensibilities that only a player with a diverse array of experiences could possess. His experiences on the path which took him through Texas to the Mid-Atlantic and ultimately New York City have most likely contributed to his identifiable voice on tenor saxophone.



Photos: Beekman

# URBAN FLUX

## Stan Killian -] [- UNIFIED [Sunnyside

POSTED BY ROB YOUNG IN MODERN JAZZ, MUSIC, NEW MUSIC, WHAT'S NEW? [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)

Wow, this cat seriously digs into the fabric of jazz I really dig this project saxophonist Stan Killian!



— Stan Killian - UNIFIED

present.

**Stan Killian -] [- UNIFIED**  
-(MP3) - [Sunnyside, 2011

The Texas-born, New York-based tenor saxophonist **Stan Killian** is the latest in a long line of saxophonists blessed with the legendary Texas Tenor sound from Arnett Cobb and James Clay to Wilton Felder and Illinois Jacquet; all master hornmen who played with a big-toned, bravura sound of wide open spaces that covers the blues, the bayou, bop, the past, and the

A seasoned professional, Killian has gigged with many of today's brightest stars including Luis Perdomo, Antonio Sanchez, Gene Jackson, Eric Revis, Mike Moreno, Ben Monder, and Scott Colley. Killian steps into the spotlight as a leader on this aurally auspicious Sunnyside debut, *Unified*.

While writing the music for this album, I focused on two ideas, Killian says. First, instead of being concerned with composing intellectually difficult music for my band for the sake of being hip, I sought simply to write the most beautiful melodies I could imagine. Secondly, I wanted to unite my seemingly disparate influences into a program of what my idea of modern jazz is: the feel of deep swing with combined melodic voices, informed by the various jazz languages.

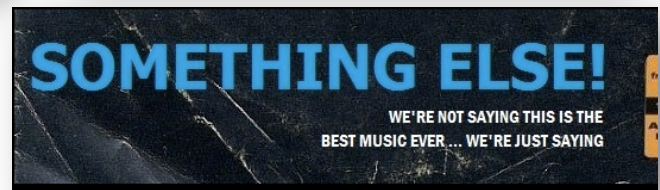
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**Stan Killian's Unified** is an attractive album right from the first listen. Actually, even before that first listen. Checking out the names of horn players playing alongside Killian listed on the back cover of the CD case, I saw there was already a recipe for success: Dave Binney (alto sax), Jeremy Pelt (trumpet) and Roy Hargrove (trumpet). But upon taking in this album, it became appealing for another reason, a reason I couldn't nail down until I read these words my Killian himself: "...instead of being concerned with composing intellectually difficult music for my band for the sake of being hip, I sought simply to write the most beautiful melodies I could imagine." That's right, it's the melodies, stupid!

The songs, nearly all clocking in at the 6-8 minute range, seem to move along much quicker than that. This is what good and snappy melodies will do for the listening experience. Each of the seven songs has its own distinct character, flowing along a common thread of soulfulness and intelligent progression. It's there on the cool strut of "Twin Dark Mirrors," which begins with a spiritual intro akin to "A Love Supreme." Even "Eternal Return," which is the first song Killian has composed, is a fully formed tune faithful to the hard bop 60s golden era. I also dig the catlike moves of "Center," (see video of live performance below) where bassist Corcoran Holt's lines keep the song light on its feet.

Killian also stated another goal for this record: "I wanted to unite my seemingly disparate influences into a program of what my idea of modern jazz is: the feel of deep swing with combined melodic voices, informed by the various jazz languages." That unity of styles become most evident on songs like "Elvin's Sight," the only non-Killian song (composed by his Venezuelan pianist, Benito Gonzalez), where Elvin Jones' patented Latin polyrhythm as reproduced by Darrell Green swings like mad and even as both Killian and Binney are improvising simultaneously, the song never comes close to losing it; that's unity. Binney joins Killian again on the title track, a beautiful tone poem that recalls Wayne Shorter's softer harmonies during his classic Blue Note days.



Don't be misled by the pretty harmonics, though; there's fine playing done on this record. Texas-born Killian takes Sonny Rollins' fluid approach, bulks it up and adds just a touch of that Texas tenor twang to it. He mixed and matched his personnel judiciously on this record, and paired himself up with only one of the three star horn players at a time. The hurried pace of the bop burner "Isosceles" offers the opportunity for Killian to show off his big chops, and going up against a major figure like Hargrove, he proves that he belongs in that kind of company. Binney did great in sparring with Killian on the aforementioned "Elvin's Sight," but also puts forth a blazing solo in the middle of "Window Of Time." Pelt, who I see as the next Roy Hargrove, brings more sting to his trumpet than Hargrove, and blows a sharp, sassy solo on "Eternal Return" that backs up my assertion. McClenty Hunter, an up and coming drummer we introduced on this site just a week ago, adds much swing and pop to that ending number.

As Killian's third album, but the first on about eight or nine years, *Unified* presents him as a fully formed talent who has every right to be performing with the likes of Hargrove, Binney and Pelt. But his flair for compositions that sound good on their own makes this an uncommonly strong record from both aspects: performance and melody. Stan Killian had a plan for this record and he executed it to perfection.

*Unified* went on sale May 3, by Sunnyside Records. Visit Stan Killian's website.