

# Julia Keefe Indigenous Big Band

*with* Mali  
Obomsawin

Friday, November 22  
Boroughs Theatre  
Prior Presents 2024–25

**PRIOR**  
Performing Arts Center

# Welcome

Dear friends,

This evening we have the happy opportunity to welcome one of the most exciting new groups in contemporary jazz, the Julia Keefe Indigenous Big Band.

While the band itself is new on the scene, its artists are acclaimed for their prolific work in other settings. The band is led by the celebrated conductor and extraordinary vocalist Julia Keefe (Nez Perce), whose gifts in both realms are astonishing. Performing a wide range of styles with wit, swing, and verve, Keefe and her band will delight you with their skill; charm you with their camaraderie; and impress you with their devotion to engaging and extending the rich history of jazz.

As we'll learn tonight, that history has always included Indigenous artists. Even still, Indigenous involvement remains an underappreciated aspect of the jazz tradition. The Julia Keefe Indigenous Big Band serves as an antidote to this failure of cultural imagination by renewing our attention to historical Indigenous jazz artists and by bringing greater visibility to contemporary Indigenous composers and performers. Importantly, the band encompasses artists of diverse Indigenous identities—reflecting not only how jazz transcends cultural boundaries, but also how many different perspectives the group brings to bear on a musical form it is making its own.

I'm pleased to share that following tonight's concert, these artists will remain with us in residence to work on recording their first-ever album as the Julia Keefe Indigenous Big Band. To say that Holy Cross and The Prior are honored to initiate this project with the band is a massive understatement. Indeed, we simply couldn't be more thrilled for these exceptional musicians to take up residence in our recording studio—nor happier to play a small role in increasing the reach of their music to audiences all over the world.

At The Prior, we believe that supporting the development of new artistic work (whether by emerging college artists, local creatives, or esteemed guests from more far-flung locations) is central to the mission of a performing arts center on a liberal arts campus. This is true not least because it provides such a valuable opportunity for interdisciplinary learning and engagement. We'd like to extend a special welcome to all our first-year students in the audience as well as to those joining us from other courses. We're also pleased to welcome audience members from across Central Massachusetts. We've been delighted to learn that many of you who came to be aware of the band, and perhaps even of The Prior, through Worcester's own WICN radio.

Tonight we are also happy to host bassist, composer, and songwriter Mali Obomsawin (Odanak). Obomsawin's celebrated debut record *Sweet Tooth* announced a talent whose voice defies categorization; the artist's recent and ongoing projects range from free jazz to folk rock, from headlining bands to composing for film. Her songs for the hit FX television series *Reservation Dogs*, about teenage life in rural Oklahoma, are particular favorites of mine—and perhaps soon of yours.

I hope you have a wonderful evening with the Julia Keefe Indigenous Big Band and Mali Obomsawin. In the meantime, it's not too early to begin planning your next visit to The Prior. Check out the end of this program for the rest of the 2024-25 Prior Presents series; and visit our website, [priorperformingartscenter.org](http://priorperformingartscenter.org), for our full slate of academic and community programming.

Warm wishes,

Kyle Frisina  
Nancy Savage Skinner '79 Interim Director

# Biographies

**The Julia Keefe Indigenous Big Band (JKIBB)** is an ensemble of Native and Indigenous jazz musicians from across Indian Country. Performing pieces from their under-appreciated predecessors in jazz, like Mildred Bailey (Coeur d'Alene) and Jim Pepper (Kaw/Mvskoke), alongside works by contemporary Indigenous composers, the band spotlights a vibrant, long-standing tradition of Indigenous improvised music today.

Led by the celebrated vocalist and luminary Julia Keefe (Nez Perce), the ensemble brings charisma, passion, and purpose to every stage, leaving audiences both inspired and educated. Premiering at Washington Center for the Performing Arts in 2022, the band quickly gained a reputation for deepening and challenging our understanding of the "uniquely American" art form known as jazz. JKIBB features a 'who's who' of Indigenous bandleaders today, and headlined the Mary Lou Williams Jazz Festival at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C in 2024.

"Jazz is a uniquely American art form. The Julia Keefe Indigenous Big Band... takes that one step further."  
—*Olympian, 2022*

"Hands down one of the most epic, poignant, moving, emotional concerts/gigs I've ever seen... unbelievable talent with charisma, passion, and purpose."  
—*Pietra Mello-Pittman, producer*

"[Julia] gives me hope for the future of jazz."  
—*Judy Carmichael, NPR Jazz Inspired*

## Band Statement

Indigenous jazz musicians, ensembles, and big bands have their place in the contemporary jazz world and jazz history. Following 19th-century federal policies to remove Indian children from their homes and indoctrinate them into European culture (Indian Boarding Schools), small ensembles and big bands began to flourish on reservations across the US and Canada in the first half of the Twentieth Century. Indigenous musicians started to ascend to celebrity with jazz as their medium – including Russel "Big Chief" Moore, Mildred Bailey, Oscar Pettiford, and Jim Pepper – but were never duly credited as Indigenous visionaries in the genre.

From time immemorial, songs have been the vessels of stories and lessons for the Indigenous people of the Americas. The goals of the Julia Keefe Indigenous Big Band are to celebrate and continue that tradition, to compose and perform new music inspired by traditional backgrounds, and to create a community of like-minded peoples from all backgrounds to uplift the next generation of Indigenous jazz musicians.

Indigenous cultures are not monolithic; many cultures carry traditions and songs as old and sacred as the next. The Julia Keefe Indigenous Big Band reflects a wide range of Indigenous identities, from South America to Canada, Northeast to Southwest. Together, we represent a long-silenced, long-forgotten chapter of jazz history: the participation, contribution, innovation, and legacy of Indigenous jazz musicians. A legacy that seasoned composers and arrangers Julia Keefe and co-founder Delbert Anderson carry forward through original works inspired by songs and rhythms of their Native heritage reimagined through the language and stylings of jazz.

It is a rarity to see a single Indigenous jazz musician nowadays, let alone sixteen, on stage. The Julia Keefe Indigenous Big Band celebrates the diversity and vitality of Indigenous peoples in jazz: past, present, and future. It is the bridge for people everywhere to see themselves on the bandstand regardless of race, ethnicity, age, gender, or socio-economic status.

The JKIBB premiered at the Washington Center for the Performing Arts in May 2022. The premiere performance was made possible with the support of Jazz Road, a national initiative of South Arts, funded by the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation with additional support from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

**Julia Keefe** (Nez Perce) is an internationally acclaimed Native American jazz vocalist, actor, activist, and educator currently based in New York City. Her professional career has nearly two decades and she has headlined marquee events at the Smithsonian Museum in Washington D.C., NMAI-NY, as well as opened for the likes of 20-time GRAMMY Award recipient Tony Bennett and 4-time GRAMMY Award winner Esperanza Spalding. Her life's work is the revival and honoring of the legendary Coeur d'Alene jazz musician Mildred Bailey and is leading the campaign for Bailey's induction into the Jazz Hall of Fame at Lincoln Center.

Julia grew up in Kamiah, ID on her tribe's reservation before moving to Spokane, WA. It was in Spokane that she began studying music and competing at the Lionel Hampton Jazz Festival each year. In 2007, she won Outstanding Vocal Soloist in the alto division at the festival. She earned her bachelor's in music from the University of Miami's Frost School of Music in 2012, graduating with honors. She taught jazz voice at Gonzaga University and was a guest clinician at North Idaho College and Lionel Hampton Jazz Festival before deciding to relocate to New York City. She earned her master's in music from Manhattan School of music in 2019, under the tutelage of Theo Bleckmann, Kate McGarry, Jo Lawry, Stefon Harris, Dave Liebman, and Phil Markowitz.

Julia also has a passion for Indigenous film and was a featured artist in Sterlin Harjo's critically acclaimed documentary, *Love and Fury*. Her first feature film, *Virginia Minnesota*, was the closing feature at the Catalina Film Festival in 2018. She is the Executive Director of the Board for One Heart Native Arts and Film Festival, an annual non-profit festival in Spokane, showcasing the diversity and vitality of contemporary Native art in the Pacific Northwest and beyond.

Julia's recent recording, *Nobody Else But Me*, was released to glowing reviews. In addition to rehearsing for an upcoming album, she is currently directing the Julia Keefe Indigenous Big Band, a new project highlighting the history and future of Indigenous people in jazz that released its first studio recording spring 2024. Julia has performed with world-class musicians including Jim McNeely, John Beasley, Emmet Cohen, Billy Test, Dan Hearle, Andreas Oberg, Bob Bowman, Clipper Anderson, Jack Mouse, the Lionel Hampton Big Band, among many others.

**Mali Obomsawin** is an award winning bassist, songwriter and composer from Abenaki First Nation (Odanak). Her stunning 2022 debut *Sweet Tooth* received international acclaim and was named best of the year in GRAMMY.com, JazzTimes, NPR and more. *Sweet Tooth's* success brought Obomsawin's touring sextet to major venues and jazz festivals across the US and Canada, and landed her a triple-feature in the soundtrack of FX's hit series *Reservation Dogs*. Mali's sophomore album, *Greatest Hits* by Deerlady (her indie-shoegaze duo with guitarist Magdalena Abrego), was released January 19, 2024. NPR's Lars Gotrich calls *Greatest Hits* a "headbang while you weep" record. In addition to touring her various projects this year, Mali's score for the award-winning documentary *Sugarcane* (dir. by Julian Brave Noisecat and Emily Kassie) had its world premiere at Sundance Film Festival in January 2024, where it picked up the SIFF director's award and a distribution deal with Nat Geo and Disney+.

With an expansive background in American roots, rock, and jazz, Obomsawin carries several music traditions. She spent the early years of her career recording and touring internationally with folk-rock band Lula Wiles, who released two albums and an EP on Smithsonian Folkways Recordings. An in-demand sideperson, Mali appears often with collaborators Jake Blount and with Julia Keefe's Indigenous Big Band. She can be found in galleries and creative music spaces with friends and mentors Peter Apfelbaum, Taylor Ho Bynum, and Bill Cole's Untempered Ensemble.

Mali studied Upright Bass at Berklee College of Music from 2013-2014. She went on to study composition and improvised music at Dartmouth College with mentor Taylor Ho Bynum, where she had the opportunity to work with Peter Apfelbaum (NY Hieroglyphics, Don Cherry), Craig Harris, Mary Halverson, Nicole Mitchell, Tomeka Reid, and Tomas Fujiwara, among others. She was a twice attendee of the selective Acoustic Music Seminar in Savannah, GA, and toured and taught music extensively across the U.S., Canada, and overseas during her time at Dartmouth and Berklee, and received a B.A. in Comparative Literature and Government from Dartmouth in 2018. She was also selected to attend the International Music Creators+ Collaborators Workshop organized by Kris Davis and Angelica Sanchez (2024) through Berklee College of Music's Jazz and Gender Justice Program.

# Listener's Guide

Is this your first time attending a jazz concert? This page is for you!

Jazz is at once an historical genre of music, an approach to performance, and a musical style.<sup>1</sup> You'll hear many different forms of jazz performed tonight: from less structured, more abstract pieces to those with more discernible rhythms and melodies. Some of what you hear will be improvised in real time by the musicians on stage—never to be heard in just that way ever again! Other moments will be carefully designed in advance for maximum aesthetic and emotional impact on the audience.

If this is one of your first times listening to jazz or attending a live jazz performance, don't worry that you're "missing" anything because you're unfamiliar with the form. To anchor your experience—and release your imagination—let your mind drift over the following three questions while you listen!<sup>2</sup>

## Why does music sound the way it does?

- Are the notes loud or soft? High or low? Played for a long or short time?
- How do the instruments sound different from each other?
- Do you notice any patterns of rhythm or melody? If so, what are they? If not, what are you hearing instead?

## How does music create meaning?

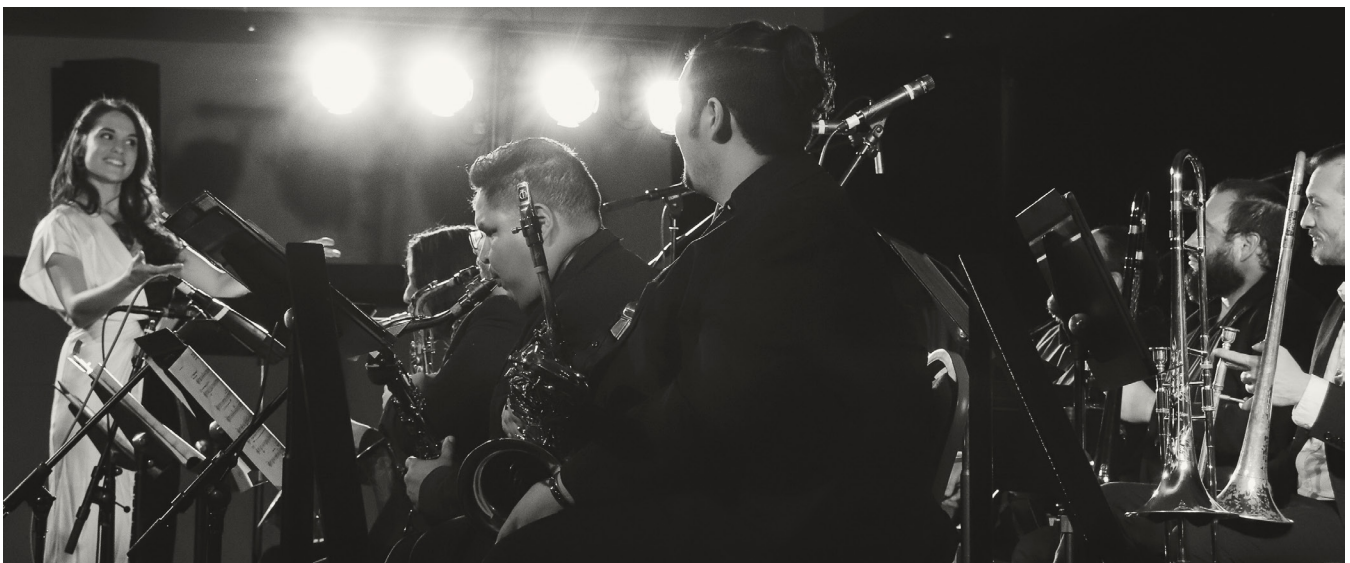
- What mood do different pieces put you in, and why?
- How do the different pieces of music performed tonight relate to or differ from one another? How does it relate to other music you know?
- What images does the music bring to mind—whether emerging from stories shared by the musicians, scenes from your own life, or something drawn from books, TV shows, news stories, or the experiences of family or friends?

## What makes music socially and emotionally significant?

- How do the performers appear to be connecting with the music they're playing?
- How do the performers interact and communicate with each other?
- What connections do you feel with the performers? What about with other members of the audience?
- Why do you think people have diverse reactions to the same piece of music?

<sup>1</sup> M. Tucker & T. Jackson, *Jazz* (Oxford Music Online, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Adapted from Larry Hamberlin, *The Curious Listener* (forthcoming from W. W. Norton, 2025).



Above: Julia Keefe Indigenous Big Band, photo by Jasz Garrett


# The Prior Performing Arts Center

An uncommon commons for transformative experiences with the arts

## 2024–25 Prior Presents Season

Prior Presents is the keystone of the Prior Performing Arts Center's public-facing programming, merging thrilling live events by visiting artists with robust educational and outreach activities. Defined by exceptional artistic quality, interdisciplinary impulses, and the potential to spark both wonder and reflection, this annual series celebrates artistic risk-taking and the exchange of ideas and perspectives from around the globe. Short- and long-term visiting artist residencies include performances, artist talks, installations, workshops, and experiential learning opportunities for Holy Cross students and the greater Worcester community.

The internationally acclaimed artists of the 2024–25 season embody our vision for artist residencies at the Prior Performing Arts Center. Their performances and lectures offer an exhilarating complement to the creativity and innovation of emerging student artists and Holy Cross faculty and staff also featured in our season this year.



Coming Soon to Prior Presents:

### August Wilson's *Two Trains Running* The Acting Company

Co-presented with the office of  
Justice, Equity, Belonging and Identity

As their neighborhood changes in unpredictable ways, a beloved Pittsburgh diner owner and his customers seek work, love, and justice in this heartfelt and hilarious play. *Two Trains Running* is the 1960s chapter of acclaimed playwright August Wilson's American Century Cycle, a decade-by-decade saga of African American life in the 20th century.

**Mon Feb 10 @ 7:00 PM**  
**Use Code TTR20 for 20% off your order!**



Scan to purchase tickets and learn more about our schedule of upcoming presentations.



Coming Soon to Prior Presents:

## Jha D. Amazi of MASS Design

Residency supported by the office of  
Justice, Equity, Belonging, and Identity

A free public lecture from the head of the Public Memory and Memorial Lab at the pathbreaking MASS Design Group. The lab's projects honor the experiences and cultures of communities historically underrepresented in our memorial landscape, with works including *The Embrace* in Boston and the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama.

**Tue Mar 18 @ 6:00 PM**  
**Free entry, registration required**



Coming Soon to Prior Presents:

## Sphinx Virtuosi *American Form/s*

"With a burst of new attention to phrases like diversity, equity and inclusion over the past two years, Sphinx's steady, patient work has come to seem prescient!"

—*The New York Times*

A journey through classically-framed infusions of soul, bluegrass, jazz, blues, and rag from the dynamic and inspiring chamber orchestra Sphinx Virtuosi, *American Form/s* is a co-production with Music Worcester.

**Sun Mar 30 @ 4:00 PM**  
**Use Code SPHINX20 for 20% off your order!**

Scan to purchase tickets and learn  
more about our schedule of  
upcoming presentations.



## Currently at the Iris & B. Gerald Cantor Art Gallery

### *Blue Profundity: Contemporary Artists Revisit A Color*

This exhibition features contemporary artists Adam Chau, Ifé Franklin, Michelle Samour, Heather Evans Smith, and Andrea Pettway Williams, who incorporate blue in their work to highlight the color's symbolic and historic meanings.

**Open now through Dec 20**

## Upcoming Events from Academic Arts

### Holy Cross Wind Ensemble | *Earth Songs*

DEPARTMENT OF MUSIC. Join the Holy Cross Wind Ensemble for a program featuring Frank Ticheli's "Earth Song" along with works by Whitacre, Hall, Ives, Iannaccone, Balmages and others.

**Sun Nov 24 @ 3:00 PM**

### Holy Cross Laptop Ensemble Federation

DEPARTMENT OF MUSIC. Join the Holy Cross Laptop Ensemble Federation (H-CLEF) for a concert of choreographed sound and image showcasing final student projects written for Music 242: Coding Music.

**Tue Dec 3 @ 8:00 PM**

### Advent Festival of Lessons and Carols

DEPARTMENT OF MUSIC. Join us for the College's Annual Festival of Lessons and Carols for Advent.

**Thu Dec 5 @ 8:00 PM**

### Gamelan Gita Sari

DEPARTMENT OF MUSIC. Under the direction of Nyoman Catra, one of Bali's most renowned master artists of traditional dance/theatre, our Balinese dance and Gamelan students collaborate with guest artists for this fall concerts. The highlight of our season and a treat for all ages.

**Sat Dec 7 @ 7:30 PM**

### *Sweeney Todd* | Music & Lyrics by Stephen Sondheim

DEPARTMENT OF THEATRE & DANCE. Stephen Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd* is a musical adaptation of a delectably lurid melodrama about a barber whose fury and despair over the loss of his innocent wife turns him into a serial killer. Meaghan Deiter directs.

**Thu Feb 6 through Sun Feb 16**



Scan to purchase tickets and learn more about our schedule of upcoming presentations.



## Prior Performing Arts Center Staff

Ethan Bates, Arts Marketing & Communications Manager  
Marta Beyer, Manager of Artistic and Engagement Initiatives  
Evan Crocker, Event & Front of House Manager  
Morgan Fitzpatrick, Office Coordinator  
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Kyle Frisina, Nancy Savage Skinner Interim Director  
Christine Goguen, Costume Shop Manager  
Katrina Lewonczyk, Manager of Operations & Administration  
Stephen McGonagle, Technical Director  
Judi Olson, Costume Shop Assistant  
Phillip O'Toole, Director of Production  
Mason Parece, Production Technician  
Betsy Pierce, Assistant Technical Director  
Brian Saia, Audio Supervisor  
Brenda Shepard, Senior Production Technician

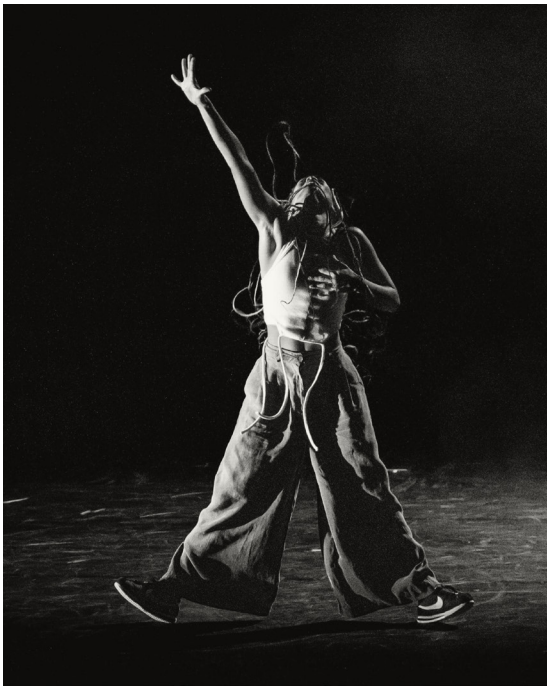
## Prior Performing Arts Center Student Staff

Evan Ali, Anna Brown, Emma Butler, Emma Coonan, Ethan Courcelle, Brendon Curtis, Brandon Curtis, Gabriellie De Gouveia, Laurel Deneen, Maggie Dewald, Amy Diaz-Rivera, Julia Divine, Despina Drosinos, Gracyn Epstein, Adele Feldberg, Shane Fitzpatrick, Audrey Forman, Caitlyn Fox, Emily Fox, Nadia Frempong, Kyle Gove, Emmett Griffin, Piper Guiney, Daniel Hickey, Alejandro Irizarry, Patrick Jacobs, Lily Jaramillo, Karamo Kaba, Morgan Kane, Mary Grace Kelly, Nicole Khawl, Jackson Knoll, Joshua Love, Irene Mandile, Eugene Mantilla, Foster Martinuk, James McCarthy, Molly McCracken, Maggie McCracken, Sydney McDonald, Emily McHugh, John Mondy, Camila Müller-Juez, Monique Narvaez, Fiona Nelson, Nohemi Neri, Vanessa Nolan, Brigit O'Connell, John O'Keefe, Elise O'Neill, Regina Palladino, Sarah Park, Ester Paw, Catalina Powderly, Nuala Reynolds, Jacob Ryan, Natalia Salinas, Eliza Simpson, Wesley Smith, Livia Smolizza, Alyshia Solomon, Sophie Sundaram, Paige Thomson, Sebastian Torres, Melina Valencia, Victor Walsh, Xiaoyi Wang, Marquis Wilson, Atiya Woolman

### **NEW!** Refreshments at the O'Connor Family Café

We're delighted to share that patrons may now **visit the O'Connor Family Café** on the ground floor (the Beehive) of The Prior to purchase **coffee, tea, Italian sodas, alcoholic beverages, and snacks**. The Café will be open until show time before all Prior Presents events and on select other occasions.

[priorperformingartscenter.org](http://priorperformingartscenter.org)



## Prior Presents 2024–25

Clockwise from top left: Camille A. Brown & Dancers | Thursday, September 12, 2024;  
Johnny Gandelsman, violin; Gandelsman with the Worcester Chamber Music Society | Thursday,  
September 26, 2024

Photography by Troy B. Thompson



## Prior Presents 2024–25

Clockwise from top left: Aimee Nezhukumatathil | Thursday, October 3, 2024; Mfoniso Udofia's *Sojourners*, a Pop-Up from The Huntington Theatre | Tuesday, November 19, 2024  
Photography by Troy B. Thompson





## Academic Arts 2024–25

Clockwise from top left: Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*, Department of Theatre & Dance; Vieve Francis & Matthew Olzmann, Working Writer Series; Holy Cross Wind Ensemble & Worcester Youth Orchestra Wind Ensemble and Holy Cross Orchestra, Department of Music