



## The Playmaker

Mads Tolling | Self Published

By [John Kelman](#)

He's been around for a few years as a member of the Turtle Island Quartet, but for some he's best known for his work on Stanley Clarke's welcome return to fusion, *The Toys of Men* (Heads Up, 2007). Either way, *The Playmaker* isn't the violinist's first release as a leader--that would be *Speed of Light* (Self Published, 2008)--but it's the first to expand his trio, featuring guitarist Mike Abraham and bassist George Ban- Weiss, to a more powerful quartet with drummer Eric Garland. It also capitalizes on his increased visibility over the last couple years, with some high profile guest spots.



His sometimes employer, bass icon [Stanley Clarke](#), guests on "The Contemplator," one of six Tolling originals that sit alongside covers of songs by Radiohead, Led Zeppelin, [Pee Wee Ellis](#) and [Thelonious Monk](#), as well as a lyrical Swedish folk song dedicated to the memory of another influential bassist, [Niels-Henning Ørsted Pedersen](#). Also featuring vibraphonist [Stefon Harris](#), "The Contemplator" is, in many ways, exactly the opposite of what might be expected from a guest session with Clarke. Classical in tone, with Harris' solo intro taking up a quarter of the song's brief four minutes, it's a gently evolving piece of chamber jazz that features Clarke's recognizable arco in a piece that's all about nuance and interpretation, rather than chops.

Not that there isn't a prerequisite virtuosity required throughout *The Playmaker*, but even when the violinist kicks up the heat, as he does on the alternating reggae/higher octane "The Risktaker"--with another guest, [Yellowjackets'](#) keyboardist [Russell Ferrante](#), in tow--Tolling avoids excess. Ban-Weiss and Garland, in particular, keep things relatively light, even on Radiohead's "Just," where Abrahams' mix of finger-picked arpeggios, bluesy bends and overdriven power chords make it an exciting opener to this stylistically eclectic set. Ending with a raucous version of Led Zeppelin's "Black Dog"--which, following a mainstream take of Monk's "Blue Monk," also demonstrates the disc's inherent playfulness--the group expands on this somewhat literal version by extending the brief inter-section drones for Tolling's appropriately unfettered violin, referencing a hint of India and the Middle East.

Ban-Weiss pays tribute to [Jaco Pastorius](#) while avoiding direct imitation on Ellis' "The Chicken"--the departed bass icon's signature tune. Still, with this version's reduced instrumentation--no horns, and Abraham's [Steve Cropper](#)-infected comping, in some ways more reverent to the original than Pastorius' ever was--is, again, lighter in feel but weighty in substance.

Tollings' six consecutive originals, almost all dedicated to friends or influences past or present--crosses a wide swatch, from the buoyant title track to the ambling "El Duderino" and higher velocity lobbies in "Starmaker Machinery," appropriately dedicated to guitar legend [John McLaughlin](#) and featuring some of vibrant and inspired interplay between Tolling and Abraham.

Virtuosity may be a given on *The Playmaker*, but what's most impressive is the sound of Tolling's quartet, which drives the majority of the record and, based on the results, must be thrilling live. For those who can, check out Tollings live; for those who can't, *The Playmaker* is a great place to start.

**Track Listing:** The Playmaker (for Tom Brady); The Contemplator (for Zinedine Zidane); The Risktaker (for LeBron James); El Duderino; Starmaker Machinery (for John McLaughlin); Loki in the Pokey; I Skovens Dybe Sille Ro (for NHOP); The Chicken (for Jaco Pastorius);

Blue Monk; Black Dog.

**Personnel:** Mads Tolling: violin; Mike Abraham: guitar (1, 3, 4, 6-11); George Ban- Weiss: acoustic and electric basses (1, 2, 4-11); Eric Garland: drums (1-5, 7-10); Stanley Clarke: acoustic bass (3); Russell Ferrante: piano and keyboard (2, 4, 5); Stefon Harris: vibraphone (3, 4); Jeff Morris: drums (6, 11).

[CD Review Center](#) | [Upcoming Release Center](#)

---

Click the **BACK** button to return to the previous page.

All material copyright © 2009 All About Jazz and contributing writers.  
All rights reserved.