

# Dan Willis

## Press Quotes

"Dan Willis' evocative mix of smarts, skill, wit, adventure, and swing – as both composer and improviser – can make for compelling listening."

- **Zan Stewart**, *Newark Star-Ledger*

"The music is decidedly forward-looking; it brings in many influences, from jazz and classical to rock. *Many Worlds Theory* starts with bass clarinet, murmurs amid drums, trumpet and guitar textures, then turns subtly funky, with spirited soprano sax and wah-wah guitar."

- **Zan Stewart**, *Newark Star-Ledger*

"Willis, who plays 11 wind instruments here, is a fine soloist with a highly developed sense of line to go with his judgement as an arranger."

- **Ray Comiskey**, *Dublin Times*

"*Velvet Gentlemen* demonstrates qualities that are hard to find: it's cerebral in conception, yet paradoxically never less than profoundly moving."

- **John Kelman**, *All About Jazz*

"Willis's saxophone playing echoes the energetic style of the New York '70s loft scene: rapid-fire, questing, veering toward atonality; in this velvety context, it's a successful sound. And that sound is, well, a velvety one, overlaid with sumptuousness. The velvety sound derives in part from the multiple instruments Willis plays in addition to tenor and soprano sax: oboe, English horn, the Armenian duduk and others."

- **Jeff Dayton-Johnson**, *All About Jazz*

With an arsenal of conventional and indigenous woodwinds at hand, Willis' breathes fluency and articulately expressed themes into a set that sustains gobs of interest from start to finish.

- **Glen Astarita**, *Downbeat*

"Willis' composing style is sometimes akin to film-score like attributes, executed by a scaled down ensemble. Hence, he's a melody maker, which is a component that counterbalances passages where electric guitarist McCann cranks up the volume via a mishmash of distortion techniques. No doubt about it, Willis has delivered the knockout blow with this exceptional and uncannily accessible studio outing."

- **Glen Astarita**, *Downbeat*

"Standing tall among the next wave of musicians who believe in jazz as art is multicultural multi-instrumentalist Dan Willis, basically a reed man but able to play classical oboe as well as English horn, Armenian duduk and Chinese suona. And the irrepressible piccolo.... Thankfully, Willis values the power of melody. While these 11 pieces are thick with the intricacies of complex music theory, they also have reassuring lyrical forms and melodic appeal. Think of them as beautiful men and women with awesome brains."

- **Chuck Graham**, *The Tucson Citizen*

"Willis is a horn master. He's on 11 instruments here, from tenor and soprano saxophone, oboe and English Horn to duduk, suona and samba whistle. He favors detailed, densely drawn construction, and dubs himself into a woodwind ensemble, packing tunes with elaborate and minute passageways: pop drama, 1970s and 80s electric jazz, and pure improv."

- **Greg Buium**, *Downbeat*

Science may have been the catalyst in this album, but Willis' vast experience -chamber ensembles, Broadway, Michael Brecker's Quintet- seem to have helped his mind discover the creative possibilities of this album.

- **Mike Shanely**, *Jazztimes*



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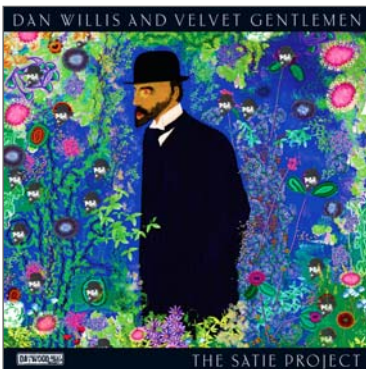


Stop and listen.

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"Dan Willis' evocative mix of smarts, skill, wit, adventure, and swing - as both composer and improviser - can make for compelling listening." -Newark Star-Ledger



## The Satie Project

Saxophonist Dan Willis and his band Velvet Gentlemen has released his fourth full-length album, *The Satie Project* (Daywood Drive Records), a tribute to late French composer and pianist Erik Satie. It is Willis's ambitious effort to reinterpret many of the artist's most celebrated compositions.

One of New York City's most versatile woodwind specialists, Dan Willis can be heard both on Broadway in such musicals as *West Side Story* (where he currently plays eight instruments) and in Manhattan's finest jazz venues. Known around NYC music circles as a reed doubler, Willis masterfully genre hops between jazz, classical, free improvisation, rock and pop on an astounding 11 different wind instruments. Willis has performed and/or recorded alongside Michael Brecker (with his Grammy Award-winning ensemble *Quindectet*), Wynton Marsalis, Elton John, Ray Charles, Bono, Liza Minnelli, Don Henley, Rob Thomas and many others. *The Satie Project* follows his three previously released recordings: *Dan Willis Quartet*, *Hand To Mouth*, and *Velvet Gentlemen*.

On his latest recording, *The Satie Project*, Willis presents newly arranged material based on a collection of 15 compositions originally written by Erik Satie. *The Satie Project* unveils Willis's admiration for Satie's breathtaking body of work with singular contemporary classical and jazz takes on Satie's "First Gymnopedie," "Second Gymnopedie," "Third Gymnopedie," "Nocturne #1" to "Nocturne #6," "First Gnossienne," "Second Gnossienne," "I Idylle," "III Meditation," "II Aubade" and "Olga Polka." The artwork for *The Satie Project* is by John Hughson, former head of the Art Department at SUNY Fredonia. The art depicts three different time periods of Satie's life: "Gymnopedie" (Satie as a young man, cover), "I Idylle" (middle aged man, inside cover), and "Nocturnes" (older man, back cover).

Following a car crash that left Willis suffering from severe back pain and headaches, his acupuncturist played Satie during their sessions. This unusual introduction to Satie's music had a profound impact on the saxophonist. Willis began to present arrangements of "I Idylle," "First Gymnopedie," "III Meditation" and "II Aubade" at live gigs shortly after he recorded his 2005 album *Velvet Gentlemen*. Willis comments, "I had an idea of using Satie's melodies as markers, which would allow me to improvise around recognizable elements of each tune. I decided not to record the first songs we did live for quite a while. I wanted to make sure I was happy about the direction we were headed. Working with guys like drummer John Hollenbeck and bassist Kermit Driscoll, there were so many possibilities of where the music could go. We went as deep as we could, and I'm thrilled we ended up recording the material."

Willis captured Satie's brilliance while overcoming a major obstacle of taking classical compositions and arranging them with standard jazz treatments, free jazz, and bluesy rock interpretations. On *The Satie Project*'s opening track, "Second Gymnopedie," Willis transforms the piece into a jazz sextet arrangement, emulating the essential Satie theme of child-like playfulness - a theme found in several of Satie's works. Many Satie compositions are also dedicated to close friends and family. The "Second Gymnopedie" is for his brother Conrad. The brotherly interplay is immediately felt by Willis playing soprano saxophone and Chuck MacKinnon on flugel horn. He simply states the melody in unison, and then jumps into improvisations with accompaniment by the guitar trio plus accordion, which adds a hint of French flavor.



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The second track on the album, "Nocturne #2," introduces his work on Satie's Nocturnes, which he wanted to do as duos to reflect the left hand/right hand nature of Satie's piano playing. Willis notes, "I decided to do all six of Satie's Nocturnes. I absolutely fell in love with them all, and I knew by playing each of them I'd be able to explore new avenues that are typically not covered in jazz music." "Nocturne #2" is from Satie's war and post-war period, and is a quick switch of moods from the opening track, allowing Willis to delve into his classical side. His soprano sax soars five octaves (extending the original four octave composition) atop classical bassist Richard Sosinsky's dark brooding 12/8 bass work. The arrangement presents a graceful dance of two musicians, as if they were "skating for the gold." The emotive side of the piece shifts just as swiftly and seamlessly as does its performance, and ends with what Willis sees as "Satie himself smiling."

"I Idylle," the first Satie composition Willis arranged - and the song that inspired the entire recording project - is dedicated to Satie's longtime friend and fellow composer Claude Debussy. Kermit Driscoll's bass ostinato becomes the springboard for an improvised restructuring of the melody, which the band builds on, ultimately spilling into a tumultuous exchange of distorted trumpet and guitar ala Miles Davis's electric '70s period. Of his take on "Nocturne #3" (1919), Willis notes, "the guitar duo is happy and free flowing, evoking a breezy walk along the French countryside." The piece closes with a triumphant three octave arpeggio of lightly overdriven guitar as Willis wants the last phrase to not only ring, but to really rock.

"Third Gymnopedie" (1888) features a haunting melody by French violinist Antoine Silverman. Willis says, "The rock ballad treatment on this one is very much influenced by Peter Gabriel's music." Satie's "First Gnossienne" (1890) was influenced by the 1889 World's Fair in Paris, and is reinterpreted by Willis mystifying the Asian scale (a minor scale with a flat 5) set forth by Satie and his band's sultry muted trumpet and bluesy B3 organ. "Nocturne #4" (1919) highlights Willis performing several parts on soprano sax and flute alongside Kermit Driscoll's electric bass. He believes, "This piano left hand interlude perfectly fits with Driscoll's innovative bass style."

Satie's most revered composition, "First Gymnopedie" (1888), is approached as a standard jazz piece with tenor saxophone, flugel horn and a jazz combo - the perfect vehicles to shape its tender and reflective melody. "III Meditation," another Satie piece that Willis initially arranged for his live gigs, shows the ensemble fully stretched out into free jazz forms. Willis comments, "The 6/8 ostinato could very well have been an influence for Lyle Mays and Pat Metheny compositions," Willis acknowledges. "Our version features an accordion and bass melody with plenty of horn fanfares."

The latter part of the album includes interpretations of the remaining Satie "Nocturnes" (#1, #5, #6). "Nocturne #1" is a two-keyboard tribute to the eccentricities of Satie's double keyboard invention. "Nocturne #6" is all about Willis. Accompanied by a brass quartet comprised of bass trombone, trombone, and two trumpets, he plays flute, oboe and soprano saxophone. "Nocturne #5" holds a similar nature, with Willis as the solo musician playing six different instruments on the track.

"II Aubade" has its melody in both the tenor saxophone and bass with an accordion accompaniment. Willis's free improv solo on the soprano saxophone is inspired by, and uses, motivic development directly from the composition. "Second Gnossienne" is, again, Willis at work on five instruments. The final track, "Olga Polka," is dedicated to both Willis's grandma Olga, and Satie's sister Olga. Willis states, "There is a time when there is nothing left to do but dance, whether you are happy or sad. The middle section of this composition has the melody at 400% slower, making what was a happy melody seemingly sad and haunting. This piece really revisits my own personal musical roots. One day I realized that the absence of words makes instrumental music much closer to dance than I had considered with vocal music."

Dan Willis deftly redefines what it means to be a horn player performing in the New York music scene in 2010. His virtuosity on a staggering list of reed instruments and his restless curiosity to explore classical, jazz, rock, pop and new music have afforded Willis the insight to tackle the works of Erik Satie in a creative and unconventional manner. Not easily pigeonholed as simply a classical or jazz artist, Willis openly engages music with no guidelines or restrictions in an effort to discover new ways of presenting his distinguished brand of original music.



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# Dan Willis



Photo: Jill Steinberg

## Bio

Dan Willis, one of New York City's most active and versatile woodwind specialists, performs regularly across a wide spectrum of music from Jazz to New Music. He is the newest member of the multi media ensemble 'VIA' (Vision Into Art) and is featured on their latest recording "Traveling Songs" playing Saxes, Oboes, Duduk (traditional Armenian folk double-reed instruments) and the EWI (electronic wind instrument). Dan was also a featured performer on the Dukuk and the Zurna, at the New York premiere of "Strophes," a work composed by Yakov Koslov. Dan is also a member of The Gotham Wind Symphony Dan and also been a regular addition to the N.Y Pops and N.Y. Philharmonic. All of these endeavors attest to the rich vocabulary within Dan's musical language.

In addition to his work in the classical genre, he has toured Japan and the U.S. with Michael Brecker's Grammy winning Ensemble 'Quindecet', performed with Wynton Marsalis and the Jazz at Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra, toured with Don Henley, and arranged for Bone, Thug and Harmony. Dan is also a member of the Roland Vasquez Bigband, the Grammy Nominated John Hollenbeck Large Ensemble and recorded on the Duduk as a featured artist for the Rob Thomas solo CD single "All That I Am." (Grammy Nominated)

Dan is also a frequent collaborator to the Baby Einstein Classical Music Educational Series performing on Flute, Oboe, English Horn and Clarinet. A graduate of the Eastman School of Music, Dan studied the Oboe with Dr. Richard Killmer, Jazz with Bill Dobbins and Ramon Ricker, and arranging with Rayburn Wright.



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## Photos

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## Video Links

### **First Gnossienne Live from Galapagos**

<http://www.youtube.com/user/DaywoodDrive#p/u/16/wvdoZQjdTDs>

### **III Meditation Live from Galapagos**

[http://www.youtube.com/user/DaywoodDrive#p/u/15/v\\_JnVRyeQyE](http://www.youtube.com/user/DaywoodDrive#p/u/15/v_JnVRyeQyE)

### **2nd Gnossienne Live from Galapagos**

<http://www.youtube.com/user/DaywoodDrive#p/u/14/mgjAmTr4seM>

### **Dan Willis talks about The Satie Project (part 1)**

<http://www.youtube.com/user/DaywoodDrive#p/u/18/jpX-u81seVI>

### **Dan Willis talks about The Satie Project (part 2)**

[http://www.youtube.com/user/DaywoodDrive#p/u/17/ZL2rT\\_Xe-TY](http://www.youtube.com/user/DaywoodDrive#p/u/17/ZL2rT_Xe-TY)

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