

“Last Hurrah, In Bangkok”  
By Ethan Foote  
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In late January of 2020, three other musicians and I traveled to Bangkok as part of a DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities grant to perform at the Thailand International Jazz Conference (just outside Bangkok) and to give a few concerts in the city. In addition to myself on bass, there was Herb Scott (saxophone), Amy Bormet (piano), and Will Stephens (drums). We were accompanied by my now-wife Arianna and Will’s wife Trina and their young son Ayaan.

This trip was a special one, and it would come to seem all the more special in retrospect as 2020 became the year we know it as. I had never been to southeast Asia before, and the journey to Thailand included the longest flight I’ve ever been on. Bangkok is a city like no other I’ve ever visited, an exquisitely crowded, hot, and intense place, defined in equal measure by its Buddhist temples and its opulent shopping malls, its palaces and its night life, its cosmopolitan glamour and its pollution and poverty. It’s also home to an ever more vibrant jazz culture, both in terms of university-level jazz education (such as at Mahidol University, where the conference and festival were held) and a local performance scene.

Bringing music to eager audiences in a strange new place was a thrilling experience, one my companions and I were tremendously lucky to have had when we did—at almost the last possible moment before the Covid-19 pandemic hit. For me, the trip now seems like a final, culminating adventure in that bygone world people now refer to as “The Before Times.” I often think of it as a “last hurrah” in my pre-Covid life and career, and so I titled this piece “Last Hurrah, in Bangkok.”

The only instrument in the recording is double bass, and I use it in several ways. In addition to a melody first played pizzicato and later arco, I added percussive parts by tapping on the side of the instrument and by bouncing the bow on a muted string. There is also a smattering of other sounds that are both ornaments to the melodic material and timbral points of interest in their own right. In writing it all, I was inspired, on the one hand, by the speed and complexity of Bangkok, by its tangle of highways, rivers (of water or of vehicles), labyrinthine markets, and constant teeming activity, and on the other, by the languor its tropical heat tends, at a certain point in the afternoon, to induce (while the activity continues all the same). This dual impression of the city forms the basis for, respectively, the bulk of the piece (which is fast), and the ending (which is slow). The complex melody weaves through mixed time signatures and intense syncopation, kind of like our van navigating the chaotic urban maze, amidst the many sounds and smells of the city, on the way to our gigs.

The piece also includes a “lament”-style bass pattern (meaning a line that descends from the tonic, especially in a minor key, often used to connote sadness). In thinking back on the Bangkok trip, I’m also reminded of the sorrow that awaited the world, and this context of oncoming sorrow is intertwined with the alternately frenetic and languid feeling of being in the city.

I’ll conclude by saying that I believe the DC-Bangkok exchange is an illuminating, exciting, and needed cultural-artistic endeavor that I hope will continue. It offers musicians in both places a wonderful opportunity for learning and growth, and as I hope “Last Hurrah, In Bangkok” demonstrates, it left a lasting musical impression on me.