

About

Nathan Tokunaga

“What we play is life.”

- Louis Armstrong

Nathan Tokunaga is a New York-based clarinetist and saxophonist whose music blends classic jazz traditions with a fresh, modern voice. A 2026 YoungArts winner in jazz clarinet, he has performed widely at venues and festivals including Smalls Jazz Club, Birdland Theater, Lindy Focus, and the Healdsburg Jazz Festival. His playing bridges generations, bringing the joy and spirit of swing to a new generation of listeners.

Nathan began playing clarinet at age 9 under the tutelage of Scott Dailey at Clock Tower Music in San Carlos. Within two years, he earned a Superior rating at the CMEA Solos and Ensembles Festival. His passion for jazz was sparked during morning car rides to middle school, listening to Artie Shaw, Benny Goodman, Johnny Dodds, and Sidney Bechet.

In late 2020, multi-instrumentalist, jazz historian, and KCSM radio host Clint Baker became his mentor, guiding him into early jazz traditions. A couple of years later, New Orleans clarinet virtuoso Evan Christopher also became an important influence. Since then, numerous professional musicians have contributed to his artistic development, shaping him as both a sideman and bandleader.



Nathan began performing jazz professionally in 2021 at age 14 and has since played hundreds of concerts from coast to coast. He has appeared in dance halls, festivals, jazz clubs, live streams, and private events. Recently, he performed five consecutive nights with the Lindy Focus Orchestra for nearly 1,000 swing dancers at Lindy Focus, one of the world's largest swing dance festivals.

Nathan has led his own ensembles in the San Francisco Bay Area since 2022. After relocating to New York City for college, he has performed with multiple bands and was recently offered several bandleading engagements, marking the next step in his work as a leader. A versatile multi-instrumentalist, he performs on clarinet, tenor saxophone, alto saxophone, and soprano saxophone, often switching seamlessly between instruments mid-performance.

This summer, Nathan returns to the Bay Area for a series of performances, continuing to expand his work as a performer and emerging bandleader.