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DOWNBEAT (ISSN 0012-5769) Volume 88, Number 2 is published monthly by Maher Publications, 102 N. Haven, Elmhurst, IL 60126-2970. Copyright 2020 Maher Publications. All rights reserved. Trademark registered U.S. Patent Office. Great Britain registered trademark No. 719.407. Periodicals postage paid at Elmhurst, IL and at additional mailing offices. Subscription rates: \$34.95 for one year, \$59.95 for two years. Foreign subscriptions rates: \$56.95 for one year, \$103.95 for two years.

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POSTMASTER: Send change of address to: DownBeat, P.O. Box 11688, St. Paul, MN 55111-0688. **CABLE ADDRESS:** DownBeat (on sale January 26, 2021) Magazine Publishers Association.



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FEBRUARY 2021

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'Somewhere, Somebody Has the Blues'

BY J.D. CONSIDINE

For this special cover story, DownBeat digs into the meaning and importance of the blues. We check in with blues stars Christone "Kingfish" Ingram, Shemekia Copeland, Ruthie Foster, Billy Branch and other musicians to spotlight this enduring art form.



Bassist William Parker has released a new box set, *Migration Of Silence Into And Out Of The Tone World*.

Cover photo of Christone "Kingfish" Ingram shot by Rory Doyle.

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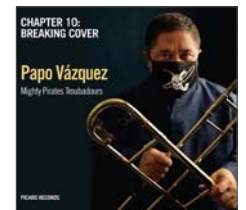
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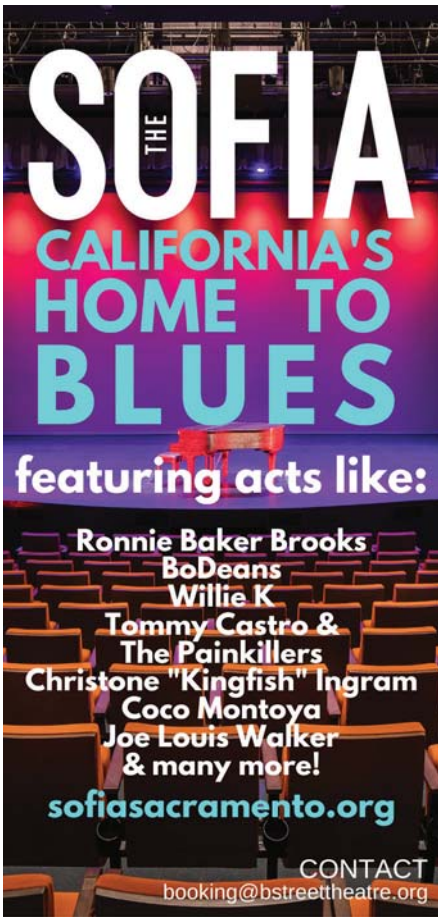
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First Take > BY BOBBY REED

Buddy Guy (left) and Kingfish perform in Chicago.



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Past, Present & Future Blues

IF YOU HAVEN'T HEARD OF KINGFISH, GET ready to meet a fascinating artist. When our editorial staff was discussing ideas for a special cover story on the blues, many names came to mind as potential artists for the cover photo. We envisioned—and asked journalist J.D. Considine to craft—an article about the blues itself, as opposed to an artist profile.

For our cover photo, we felt it was appropriate to select an artist who, in some ways, embodies the past, present and future of the blues.

Buddy Guy would have been an obvious choice, but he had been on the cover of our special blues issue 10 years ago. Keb' Mo' is a blues artist whom everyone—from critics to casual fans—seems to love. Grammy winner Fantastic Negrito has been a hit on the festival circuit. Joe Bonamassa is a global superstar. Gary Clark Jr. seems to get better each year. And Shemekia Copeland's latest album, *Uncivil War* (Alligator), is one of the most important blues albums of this century.

But in the end, youth won us over. Our cover artist is Christone "Kingfish" Ingram, a 21-year-old from Clarksdale, Mississippi. His 2019 Alligator debut, titled *Kingfish*, shook up the blues world. As a vocalist and guitarist, he has his own performance style, while simultaneously nodding to blues icons of the past.

If you heard a Kingfish track without knowing who the artist was—as in a DownBeat Blindfold Test—you might envision an artist who's much older. Indeed, a motif in his lyrics and in the commentary surrounding his work is that Kingfish is an "old soul."

On the song "Been Here Before," a track he

wrote with drummer/producer Tom Hambridge, Kingfish sings, "Some days I feel so different/ It's like I don't fit in/ Some kids like the greatest hits/ But I dig Guitar Slim/ Some days I wake up grateful/ Some days I'm not so sure/ I can still hear Grandma saying, 'Child, you've been here before.'"

In addition to announcing the arrival of a new star, Kingfish's debut also seemed to convey the passing of a torch. Two iconic vocalist/guitarists are guests on the album: Buddy Guy and Keb' Mo'. Kingfish has proven himself adept at delivering the fiery fretwork and witty vocals of the former, as well as the soulful, melodic charm of the latter.

Kingfish's ability to empathize with his audience—and create an authentic emotional connection—seems to belie his youth.

This summer, Kingfish released the ballad "Rock & Roll." It's a tribute to his mother, Princess Latrell Pride Ingram, who died in 2019 at age 49. It's a beautiful, powerful piece of music. And it's a reminder of why the blues resonates with listeners around the world: Everyone experiences pain, and everyone yearns for better days.

Blues artists like Kingfish remind us that, as human beings, we have a lot in common. That idea can provide us with emotional sustenance as we face life's tough challenges.

We hope our cover story will inspire you to check out some blues tunes. If you have comments about that article, or anything else, please send an email to editor@downbeat.com and include "Chords & Discords" in the subject line. Thanks for reading.

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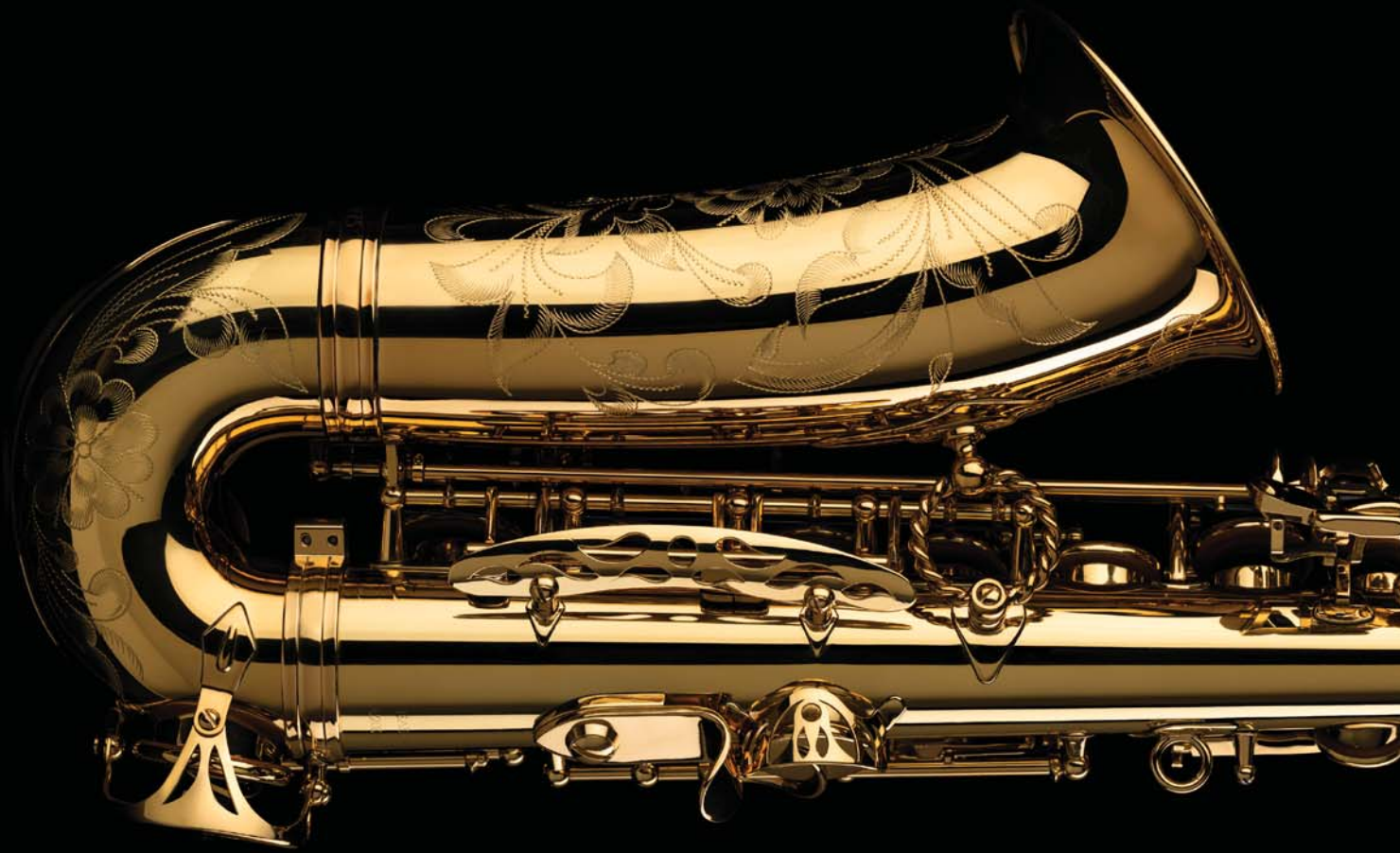
McCoy Tyner (1938-2020)
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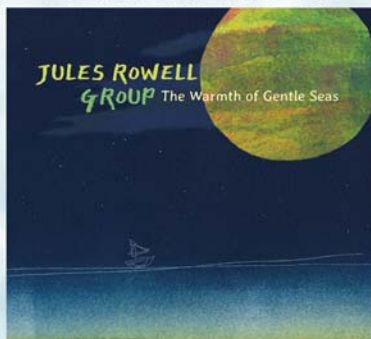
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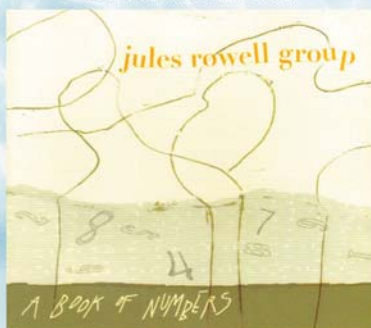
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Does an Artist Need a Label?

As a scrappy, independent jazz artist, I'm curious about your process for selecting which albums to review each month. I noticed that in the September through December issues, in the Reviews section, there was only one title identified as a self release (Tarik Hassan's *Yalla!* in the November issue).

Although I had some label interest for my new big band album, *All Figured Out*, I actually chose to stay independent for various reasons, which I imagine many other jazz musicians are doing in these do-it-yourself times. However, I now wonder whether self-releasing the album actually hurt my chances at getting a review in *DownBeat*. Your staff and contributors probably get flooded with messages from musicians like me, trying to get noticed. I do enjoy reading the reviews that make it in each month, but I am curious as to how much weight the record labels still have in the industry.

On another note, thanks for continuing to put out an excellent magazine, especially during these extremely difficult times. I've found myself questioning whether it's still worth pursuing music creation and performance, given the extreme difficulties caused by this pandemic. And yet, each month when



Derek Brown

COURTESY OF ARTIST

I read *DownBeat*, I come away thinking, "This music still matters!"

DEREK BROWN
GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN

Editor's Note: Thanks for your letter, and thanks for contributing a Master Class to our December issue. When we are discussing which albums to include in the Reviews section, the label that an album is on—or the fact that it is self-released—is not a major factor in our decision-making process. In the Reviews section of our issues from September through December, several of those titles were released on the artist's own label, or on a label that was not among the top 30 labels receiving votes in the Record Label category of the 2020 Readers Poll.

Praise for Palermo

In the First Take column of your December issue, it was great to read the generous words about Ed Palermo from Christian McBride.

I go back with Ed to Chicago in the 1970s, when he was active primarily as a tenor saxophonist. Ed and alto player David Boruff were part of Les Hooper's jazz/funk/rock band that played Chicago's North Side clubs and recorded the album *Hoopla*.

Ed's subsequent move to New York raised his profile, and deservedly so. *DownBeat* readers would do well to check out his big band recordings, in particular those dedicated to the music of Frank Zappa.

BILL BENJAMIN
BILTMORE LAKE, NORTH CAROLINA

Editor's Note: Turn to page 26 for our feature on the Ed Palermo Big Band.

Editor's Note: Write-in votes are allowed (and, in fact, encouraged) for each category of the Readers and Critics polls. When designing the ballot, our goal is to include enough names so that voting will be an easy process—but not so many names that the voting process becomes cumbersome.

Subscriber Since '64

Thank you for publishing the recent Readers Poll issue. I am a longtime subscriber. My first encounter with *DownBeat* was when my junior high band director gave me his Oct. 22, 1964, issue with Bill Evans on the cover. I asked my parents to subscribe for me, and ever since then, I have looked forward to each new issue.

TONY MASCI
HIGHLAND HEIGHTS, OHIO

Fair Ballots

I have been voting in the *DownBeat* Readers Poll since 1968, and I am concerned about the lists of artist names that appear on the ballot. Some of my favorite musicians were not included on the ballot for 2020, which made it virtually impossible for them to win—or even get enough votes to appear in the published results.

MARSHALL ZUCKER
WANTAGH, NEW YORK

Correction

■ In the print edition of the January issue, an album title was omitted from the list of releases that received a 4-star review during 2020. Our review of Martin Wind's *White Noise* (Laika)—recorded with Philip Catherine and Ack van Rooyen—was published in the November 2020 issue.

DOWNBEAT REGRETS THE ERROR.

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Beat

Gary Smulyan Conquers Contrafacts

“It’s a very interesting rabbit hole to dive down into, this world of contrafacts,” said baritone saxophonist Gary Smulyan. A type of jazz composition in which a new melody is placed over another song’s chord progression—for instance, Charlie Parker’s “Ornithology” over the changes to “How High the Moon”—the contrafact long has been an object of fascination for Smulyan. Since 2006, he has released four albums devoted to them: *Hidden Treasures*; *More Treasures* (2007); *Alternative Contrafacts* (2018); and his latest, *Our Contrafacts* (2020).

Smulyan credits much of his interest in the idea to Reese Markewich, a pianist and psychiatrist he met growing up on Long Island. “[H]e wrote an incredible book on substitute harmony, mostly tritone subs, called *Inside Outside: Substitute Harmony in Modern Jazz and Pop Music*,” Smulyan said. “Totally self-published, and for me, it’s the one of the best books ever written on harmony. But it’s very hard to find, because like I said, it was self-published—just a cardboard [cover] and paper with staples.

“And in the back [of the book] he had about 40 pages of reharmonizations of pretty obscure standards. I got interested in that, and I used to hang out at his house all the time. He’d show me these tunes, and we’d play.”

Markewich also wrote two books on contrafacts—*Bibliography of Jazz and Pop Tunes Sharing the Chord Progressions of Other Compositions* (1970), which Smulyan owns, and a follow-up, *The New Expanded Bibliography of Jazz Compositions Based on the Chord Progressions of Standard Tunes* (1974). The first volume lists 10 contrafacts based on Ray Noble’s “Cherokee.” By the second edition, there were 15.

“One is called ‘Yoicks,’ by Charlie Mack on Paradox Records,” Smulyan said, going through the “Cherokee” list. “I’ve never heard that. And



Gary Smulyan credits much of his interest in contrafacts to pianist Reese Markewich, who has written two books on the topic.

then there’s ‘Escalating’ by George Wallington. I’ve never heard that. There’s ‘Dial-ogue,’ which is Serge Chaloff and Ralph Burns. And ‘Chickasaw,’ which is Terry Gibbs and Shorty Rogers.”

“So, this book has become a real source book for me, to try and find these tunes,” he added. “A lot of these records have been put on YouTube.” Indeed, of the “Cherokee” contrafacts he mentioned, all but “Chickasaw” can be found online.

Ironically, *Our Contrafacts* is the only one of Smulyan’s contrafact albums not to benefit from Markewich’s work. These contrafacts all were composed by Smulyan and his trio. But what’s the difference between playing contrafacts and writing your own?

“That’s a very interesting question,” the saxophonist replied. “You’re already working with preset chord changes, so you have kind of a framework with which to write, which is different than writing a totally original composition,

where you’re trying to come up with a harmonic structure and a melodic structure.”

Listening to a contrafact can be like working a crossword, taking the new melody as a clue and then filling in the blanks. If you notice that “Quarter Blues” from *Our Contrafacts* has the same meter and changes as Miles Davis’ “All Blues,” you’ll have a different appreciation for how the band plays it.

In addition to six new contrafacts from Smulyan, *Our Contrafacts* includes two each from bassist David Wong and drummer Rodney Green.

“Actually, the first time we played together was for *Alternative Contrafacts*,” he said. “After that, we’ve had some opportunities to play live, and of course it’s never enough. But when we do play, it feels like no time has passed. We feel music and think about music in a similar way. We’re kindred spirits that way.” —J.D. Cosidine



Jeff Clayton

COURTESY CLAYTON FAMILY

In Memoriam: Alto saxophonist **Jeff Clayton**, a founding member of the Clayton-Hamilton Jazz Orchestra and The Clayton Brothers Quintet, died Dec. 17 after suffering from kidney cancer for two years. He was 65. Bassist and educator John Clayton said of his brother's passing, "I am sad but buoyed by Jeff's spirit, by recalling six decades of growth together, by the music we shared, and the knowledge that he wants us to move on, embracing and celebrating life." The Grammy-nominated saxophonist spent time working alongside Count Basie, Frank Sinatra, Ella Fitzgerald, Stevie Wonder, Madonna and numerous others.

Confirmed Closures: A pair of notable jazz venues recently announced they'll be permanently shuttered. On Dec. 2, New York club The Jazz Standard posted notice of its permanent closure on Twitter. In an email to DownBeat, Seth Abramson, the club's artistic director, said, "We are dedicated to exploring our options in New York City. ... This is not goodbye." Less than a week later, Denver's El Chapultepec, which regularly had been booking jazz since the '60s, announced that it will be permanently shutting down.

jazzstandard.com; thepeclodo.com

Landmark Year: In 2020, the Hungarian Jazz Federation hit a landmark anniversary. Coinciding with its 30th year, the organization released *30 Years of Jazz: Hungarian Jazz Federation*, overseen by Balázs Bágyi, the group's president. The book touches on notable Hungarian performers and how the music developed there, across Europe and around the world.

jazzszovetsseg.hu

Final Bar: **Stanley Cowell**, a pianist and educator tied to the avant-garde who cofounded the Strata-East label, died Dec. 17 at the age of 79. ... **Don Heckman**, a journalist who contributed to DownBeat beginning in the 1960s and also wrote for The New York Times and The Los Angeles Times, died Nov. 13.

Pianist Cohen Combines Retro and Modern Styles

IN THE SUMMER OF 2020, PIANIST EMMET Cohen asked himself a key question: "What would Louis or Dizzy do in this situation?"

At the time, much of the world was reeling from the coronavirus pandemic and the economic effects of shutdowns; the absence of in-person concerts only added to the misery.

Facing these crises, globe-hopping jazz ambassadors like Louis Armstrong and Dizzy Gillespie "would have tried to spread some joy and unity and love," Cohen told DownBeat recently by Zoom, to provide "something that the world is lacking—not only jazz, but joy."

So, in October, with the help of his booking agency, Cohen managed to revive a European tour originally scheduled for May and string together a dozen dates over 16 days, visiting Italy, Germany, Switzerland and Austria. His triomates for the tour were drummer Kyle Poole and bassist Yasushi Nakamura (subbing for Cohen's regular bassist, Russell Hall).

Cohen recalled that during the flight to Italy, "there was nobody on the plane; we each had a row to ourselves." The tour posed several risks and challenges: "The strategy was to drive everywhere or take trains; we didn't fly anywhere within Europe. ... [The fans] were hungry for live music and super-appreciative. Everywhere we played they said we were the only American band that had come over and performed."

Spreading joy is what Cohen's trio has been doing with "Live From Emmet's Place," a weekly livestream. It's also what the 30-year-old recipient of the 2019 Cole Porter Fellowship in Jazz sets out to do on his first album for Mack Avenue, a trio-centered endeavor titled *Future Stride*. Tenor saxophonist Melissa Aldana and trumpeter Marquis Hill contribute to a few tracks on the recording, including Cohen's compelling ballad "Reflections At Dusk."

The weekly webcast has become a hit, with each episode attracting as many as 1,000 live viewers. Dozens of clips are archived on YouTube, with the trio being joined by guests like vocalists Cyrille Aimée and Veronica Swift, vibraphonist Warren Wolf, guitarist Mark Whitfield and saxophonist Tivon Pennicott.

Cohen's production values are high, and he frequently tweaks the audio and camera techniques to overcome the obstacles associated with broadcasting a band performance from a Harlem apartment. One tip he offers: "Never stream over WiFi—always through an Ethernet cable. It makes all the difference."

Cohen's new album, like the trio itself, blends a variety of styles from the past, mixing originals with vintage tunes that recall the stride piano masters of the 1920s, but all played with a mod-



Pianist Emmet Cohen's new album, *Future Stride*, includes five of his compositions.

TALI SONG ROTH

ernist sensibility.

"Most people think of stride as an old or ancient thing, an antiquated style of music," he said, "but I'm trying to incorporate this style of piano playing, for no reason other than I love Fats Waller, Willie 'The Lion' Smith, Earl 'Fatha' Hines, James P. Johnson and Art Tatum, among others. From a jazz pianist's perspective, stride is one of the most challenging and exciting genres. Monk learned to play stride from Mary Lou Williams. If I love Monk, I realized that stride must be part of my journey, too. ... I came to understand that all art is modern: That's what makes it art."

Cohen has found kindred spirits in Hall and Poole. On the webcasts, the trio swings deeply, often delivering hairpin turns, starts and stops that might lead one to think they are playing well-rehearsed charts. But, in reality, as Poole explained, the musicians' seeming telepathy is a result of living and working together for five years—and, more recently, quarantining together.

"It's not that we can read each other's minds," the drummer said, "but we give each other little cues. We listen to a lot of music together. So, we have the same musical sensibilities. It's unique to be in a band where the three of us are so close. In other bands, I haven't felt that kind of true camaraderie and brotherhood. It's metaphysical, at this point."

—Allen Morrison



Pianist Art Hirahara (left) and producer Marc Free work in the Acoustic Recording studio in Brooklyn in 2018. In the background are bassist Joe Martin and saxophonist Melissa Aldana.

Posi-Tone Perseveres, Despite Pandemic

ALL MUSICIANS HAVE SEEN THEIR ACTIVITIES dramatically reduced during the coronavirus pandemic, but a core group of players associated with the Posi-Tone label has remained remarkably busy during the crisis. Between August and December, these musicians recorded a series of albums slated for release in 2021.

“Problems are just opportunities in ugly costumes,” said Marc Free, the producer who runs Posi-Tone along with his business partner, recording engineer Nick O’Toole. Free’s quip, which he made during a recent videoconference interview with *DownBeat*, reflects his optimistic, can-do attitude.

Founded in 1995, Posi-Tone has released more than 200 titles, including works by saxophonist Roxy Coss, pianist Orrin Evans and keyboardist Theo Hill. More than 100 of those albums were recorded at Brooklyn’s Acoustic Recording studio. During the pandemic, Free and O’Toole hatched the idea that their musicians could continue to record material—as long as everyone felt safe and comfortable in the working environment, including Michael Brorby, the engineer who owns Acoustic Recording.

For years, Free has fostered a significant amount of collaboration among a group of players. So, a musician who records his or her leader date with a small combo is likely to be an accompanist for one of those other musicians when the time comes for them to record their leader date.

Such collaboration requires a certain level of friendship and personal chemistry. But during the pandemic, making recordings required another huge factor: trust.

Among the musicians involved in this bold adventure are pianist Art Hirahara, bassist Boris Kozlov, drummer Rudy Royston and vibraphonist Behn Gillece. On Aug. 9–12, the quartet recorded Gillece’s album *Still Doing Our Thing* (slated for a March release) and an as-yet-untitled Hirahara leader date. All the musicians wore face coverings during the entire process, except for guest tenor saxophonist Nicole Glover, who removed her mask only when she was playing.

Free wasn’t physically present in the studio during the sessions, but he still served as producer, listening to a private livestream of the performances and offering comments via Zoom.

Before the recording sessions were organized, Free spent a lot of time on the phone, ensuring that everyone was on board. “I called up [the musicians] and I said, ‘Would you guys be willing to not take some gigs and quarantine yourself, and get tested, if necessary, so that we could do this?’ And they said, ‘Yeah, for sure,’” Free recalled. “We decided to [record material for two albums] in a kind of mammoth, four-day session. So, we did a record for Art and we did a record for Behn. I wanted to stick with people who I really had something much more than just a musical or professional relationship with.

“They needed to trust me, I needed to trust them, and they needed to trust each other,” Free continued. “Having worked together so much, these guys have a familial vibe. What I’ve been doing the last few years is like a repertory theater kind of thing, using a crew of people who move in and out. Sometimes they’re the lead, sometimes they’re in a supporting role, and sometimes they’re just writing a song for a session they’re not even on.”

In a separate interview, *DownBeat* checked in with Gillece (from his home in New Jersey) and Hirahara (from The Bunker Studio in Brooklyn) to hear their thoughts on the August recording sessions.

“Most people would make the assumption that when you put all those factors together—the pandemic, things are slow and maybe everybody’s a little rusty—that [the musicianship] might not reach a certain level,” Gillece said. “But I definitely didn’t feel like that at all, from any of my colleagues or personally. ... You know, it seems like music is this physical thing, and in a lot of ways it is. You need to keep in good physical shape to play well. But it’s definitely more mental than anything else. If you’re in the right, positive mindset, you could still perform at the top of your game—even in a trying time like this.”

Hirahara explained that although his first day back in the studio proved to be mentally exhausting, he quickly returned to his normal playing mode—albeit with a mask on.

“I think recording is really an important way for us to continue our creative output and continue evolving,” Hirahara said. “For me, it’s sort of a lifesaver to have these recording projects, because I’m not able to tour or really play out in any real, serious way.”

To avoid risks associated with ordering take-out food, Gillece packed a homemade lunch for all of the recording dates he did in 2020. “I’ve eaten egg salad at every recording session,” he said with a chuckle.

As Posi-Tone marked its 25th anniversary in 2020, Free began systematically posting older titles, as well as recent releases, on Bandcamp. At press time, there were nearly 70 titles available, including keyboardist John Escreet’s 2008 album, *Consequences*, and saxophonist Alexa Tarantino’s *Clarity*, which was released June 5.

Posi-Tone albums slated for release in 2021 include trombonist Michael Dease’s *Give It All You Got* and saxophonist Diego Rivera’s *Indigenous*, which features his original compositions, as well as renditions of tunes by Cannonball Adderley and Stevie Wonder.

“The question for us is sustainability and engagement with our audience,” Free said. “And there is no better engaged audience than the jazz audience. When people get a taste for this music—generally through seeing it live—they become jazz fans for life. They just get hooked.”

—Bobby Reed

Saxophonist Teodross Avery leads two quartets on *Harlem Stories: The Music Of Thelonious Monk*.

RIPPY AUSTIN



Avery Recruits Stellar Cast to Salute Monk

SAXOPHONIST TEODROSS AVERY'S LATEST disc, *Harlem Stories: The Music Of Thelonious Monk* (WJ3), is both a homecoming and tribute.

Monk's music entered Avery's life in the 1980s, when he was a teenager. While growing up in California's Bay Area, he was already checking out jazz through either his father's album collection or through a local college radio program. But when Avery heard the 1963 LP *Monk's Dream*, it signaled a turning point.

Avery's father had towering speakers to complement his sound system. When alone in the house, a 15-year-old Avery would blast *Monk's Dream*. "When I played it on my dad's stereo, it really felt like I was in the club with the musicians," he recalled.

While Avery recognized how advanced Monk's melodies and harmonies were, it was the music's propulsive swing that captivated him. "Monk purposely made sure that that rhythm section was swinging," Avery said. "He pulled you in as a listener through the swing."

Decades later, after establishing himself as saxophonist, composer and recording artist in New York, Avery returned to California in 2011 to get his doctorate in jazz studies from the University of Southern California. By then, he had proved his acumen in post Motown-bop, particularly on his early leader dates, *In Other Words* (1994) and *My Generation* (1996). Additionally, he demonstrated his versatility by working with a variety of artists in jazz,

hip-hop, soul and rock, including Dee Dee Bridgewater, Donald Harrison, Leela James and Amy Winehouse.

"When I left [New York City], I knew that it was time for me to return to my roots. I needed to reconnect to what inspired me from the get-go in music, which was Monk and John Coltrane," Avery said. "When I came back, I was able to get back to who I was as a jazz musician."

Harlem Stories follows Avery's 2019 disc, *After The Rain: A Night For Coltrane* (Tompkins Square), and finds the bandleader fronting two separate ensembles. For the tighter interpretations of tunes like "Teo" and "Evidence," Avery leads a quartet that includes pianist Anthony Wonsey, drummer Willie Jones III and bassist Corcoran Holt. The bassist also is featured in the other band, which includes pianist D.D. Jackson and drummer Marvin "Bugalu" Smith. With the latter combo, Avery delivers decidedly more adventurous readings of such Monk pieces as "Ugly Beauty" and "Trinkle, Tinkle."

For Holt, working in both lineups forced him to dig deep into Monk's music. "I'd definitely played some of those tunes in other situations," he said. "But I'd never recorded his music. I went back to some of Monk's recordings. That gave me a refresher, so that I [could] focus on the hook-up between the rhythm section and how Monk would play."

Throughout the program, Avery—on both tenor and soprano saxophone—enlivens Monk's music with a combination of reverence and blistering conviction. "I've heard other Monk [tribute] albums, on which the musicians totally don't care about the aesthetics of Monk; and the albums become more about their aesthetics," Avery said. "That's cool if that's what they want to do. But sometimes when musicians do that, if the listener didn't know Monk [beforehand], they wouldn't know why Monk was special from listening to those records."

Because of the coronavirus pandemic, Avery hasn't had many opportunities to perform the material from *Harlem Stories* live. While his concert dates have taken a hit, Avery's career as head of jazz studies and commercial music at the California State University, Dominguez Hills, is thriving. Nowadays, he teaches jazz ensemble classes via Zoom. And while the lack of in-person interaction is a challenge, Avery sees the situation as an opportunity to focus on each student's individual work. In fact, some of the remote learning experiences have been more productive than a typical in-person lesson.

"In the Zoom classes, I just go down the line: 'Let me see your chord scales,'" Avery continued. "The students can't get away from me. When students are playing in a [live] ensemble, there are weaknesses that get camouflaged by other members of the band. Through Zoom, I can isolate a student and they can't cop out. It's a pleasant surprise."

—John Murphy

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Aubrey Johnson Boldly Breaks the Rules

DURING THE PAST DECADE, VOCALIST

Aubrey Johnson has explored different chambers of her artistry and performed with an array of musicians, including singers Bobby McFerrin and Sara Serpa, as well as Brian Carpenter's Ghost Train Orchestra. Johnson's leader debut, *Unraveled* (Outside In)—a program featuring original compositions and new sextet arrangements of standards—takes listeners on a dramatic journey through her intriguing aesthetic.

While earning a master's degree from New England Conservatory, where she studied with pianist Frank Carlberg and vocalist Dominique Eade, Johnson discovered the freedom that comes with abandoning certain musical norms. Consequently, *Unraveled* shimmers with harmonic wanderlust. "I do a lot of modulating to different key centers, and never hold myself to the idea that I have to come back to where I started," she said.

Her lyrics reflect that freedom, too. She explained that when she's writing a piece, the melody and lyric often materialize in tandem—but only for the first phrase. "That's the magic inspiration moment," she said, adding that "rational-minded" compositional work quickly follows.

Johnson—who teaches at Berklee College of Music, Montclair State University and Queens College—often follows a maxim: "While I have an understanding of the rules, I should never feel like I have to adhere to them."

That concept emerges on "These Days." Featuring lyrics written by Johnson's brother Gentry, the track illustrates her gift for crafting a melody to pair with an existing lyric. "I pressed 'record' on my phone and improvised the melody," Johnson recalled. "It didn't matter that the lyric didn't always rhyme or have a specific meter."

But a full-hearted embrace of her individualism hasn't come easily. As a young working artist, Johnson clashed with an identity that didn't match her sound. Her soprano range wasn't an ideal fit for alto-centric big band charts, and she struggled with expectations of how she ought to sing. Still, she found ways to work. Her uncle, the keyboardist Lyle Mays (1953–2020), frequently recruited her to participate in his projects, championing her talents. One of his observations altered her self-perception: "He said, 'You have this huge palette. You should write for your range—for all these different tone colors you can create.'"

Nearing graduation, Johnson encountered a Craigslist post for a world folk band calling for a multilingual soprano who improvised. "I was like, 'Wow, sounds like me,'" recalled Johnson, who sings in English, Portuguese and Japanese on *Unraveled*. Through that band, she met vio-



CAROLINA MAMA

Aubrey Johnson's leader debut, *Unraveled*, includes sextet arrangements of standards and four original compositions.

linist Tomoko Omura, who plays on seven of the album's tracks, including her composition "Voice Is Magic." "We bonded over being the two women in the band and the two improvisers," Johnson explained.

After touring, they began playing together in Boston when Johnson's trumpet player couldn't make her leader dates. "I adapted the parts for [Omura] ... and thought—I don't need to play with anyone else," said Johnson, who revels in the violinist's textural versatility.

The two artists continued nurturing their

bond after Johnson moved to New York. "Aubrey is a strong, confident bandleader who cares about each band member deeply," Omura said. "She is very specific with what kind of sound she likes ... and is not afraid to tell us when the sound is not the way she wants. She makes the band feel comfortable to express honest feelings and thoughts."

Nowadays, Johnson serves as a mentor to her students, empowering them to seek what's special about their voices, sharing enduring advice: "Stay open to going off the beaten path."

—Stephanie Jones


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Brilliant Acting Makes 'Ma Rainey' Film Transcendent



Viola Davis (left), director George C. Wolfe and Chadwick Boseman confer during a break in the filming of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*.

ABOUT TWO-THIRDS OF THE WAY through the new Netflix film *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, the title character, played with magisterial prickliness by Viola Davis, is sitting in a Chicago recording studio, chatting with her music director, a trombonist named Cutler (Colman Domingo). It's 1927, and she's at the

peak of her career, with a large and loyal following in the rural South, and, thanks to recordings, a growing audience across the country.

Rainey has come to Chicago to cut a handful of new sides for her record company, but at this point in the plot, precious little progress has been made. Despite the best efforts of her man-

ager, Irvin (Jeremy Shamos), things keep bogging down. At the moment, she's waiting for Slow Drag and Toledo, her bassist and pianist, to fetch bottles of soda to soothe her thirst. "Too cheap to buy me a Coca-Cola," she complains to Cutler of Irvin and record company chief Mel Sturdyvant (Jonny Coyne).

Sturdyvant, meanwhile, makes it plain that he sees her behavior as petulance. But for Rainey, it's calculated payback. "They don't care nothing about me," she tells Cutler. "All they want is my voice." And that, in a nutshell, is the heart of director George C. Wolfe's version of August Wilson's 1982 play.

Just as slavery turned Black lives into living capital, so later did the recording industry commoditize Black voices. It isn't simply that Irvin and his ilk use technology to turn a one-time performance into something that endlessly could be replayed and repeatedly sold. By capturing that performance in the studio, they effectively own *Ma Rainey's* music. She knows this, and her behavior is meant to ensure that Irvin and Sturdyvant pay something more than royalties for the privilege.

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom is among the 10 plays in Wilson's famous Pittsburgh Cycle (aka The Century Cycle); producer/actor Denzel

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Washington already has helped turn two of them into films, and he plans to tackle the other eight as well.

Although there was a real Ma Rainey (1886–1939), a touring and recording star in the 1920s, dubbed “Mother of the Blues” by her label, Paramount Records, the Rainey we see on-screen is a fictional version of the blues great, and the members of her band are likewise invented. This isn’t history, at least not in the literal sense. Instead, *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* is a parable about art and commerce as distorted by the lens of American racism, and how that story gets told by the blues.

“White folk don’t understand about the blues,” Rainey tells Cutler. “They hear it come out, but they don’t know how it got there. They don’t understand that that’s life’s way of talking. You don’t sing to feel better. You sing because that’s a way of understanding life.”

A lesser playwright might have made Rainey the sole focus of the action. But Wilson, whose work articulated complicated, often contradictory dimensions of Black life, knew that you couldn’t have a singer without also having a band. So, he gives us Cutler, bassist Slow Drag (Michael Potts), pianist Toledo (Glynn Turman) and the brash, gifted cornetist Levee (Chadwick Boseman).

The contrast between Levee and the others is

obvious. Where his bandmates are older, more stoic, and duly committed to playing what Ma Rainey wants them to play, Levee is vain, excitable and ambitious—full of talent, but also full of himself. Not only has he worked up a new, hot-jazz arrangement for the tune “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom,” but he also has been composing his own music. He’s shown the songs to Sturdyvant in hopes of getting record deal for himself.

In Wilson’s play, the character note for Levee describes him as a “buffoon,” adding that he “plays wrong notes frequently. He often gets his skill and talent confused with each other.” The film version is far kinder, thanks in large part to Boseman’s brilliantly nuanced performance.

This was the last role Boseman played before succumbing to colon cancer on Aug. 28. Film critics have praised this as the best performance of Boseman’s career, which included acclaimed work as Jackie Robinson in *42* and Thurgood Marshall in *Marshall*, plus the title character in the superhero blockbuster *Black Panther*.

In Boseman’s hands, Levee remains a bit of a clown, but also genuinely, if brokenly, heroic. We see his determination, along with the desperation that lurks beneath it, and when he delivers the soliloquy about what resentful white farmers did to his family when he was a child, Boseman makes Levee almost incandescent with rage, shame and a hunger for revenge.

In adapting the play, screenwriter Ruben Santiago-Hudson bookends Wilson’s story with two musical sequences. The first, showing Ma Rainey and her band playing to an enthusiastic crowd in a backwoods tent in Georgia, vividly demonstrates her power and popularity. The last, by contrast, quietly and damningly illustrates the way the music industry has treated talented unfortunates like Levee.

Despite this story’s tragic end, there’s plenty of wit and grace in the telling. When Rainey’s stuttering nephew Sylvester (Dusan Brown) finally nails the spoken introduction to the title tune, the mix of joy, pride and surprise on his face is a wonder to behold.

Likewise, the gruff affection that animates the banter between Cutler, Toledo and Slow Drag will resonate with anyone who has spent years sharing the bandstand with the same musicians. And when the actors do “play,” they handle their instruments with credible familiarity.

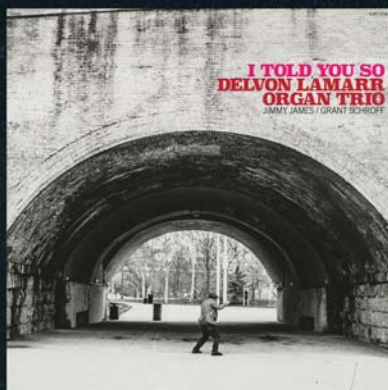
Finally, there’s Rainey herself. Davis—who won an Oscar for her role in the 2016 film adaptation of Wilson’s play *Fences*—understands how to use her character’s sly intelligence and iron will to show us someone whose greatest triumph is getting her due in a system that’s gamed against her. Ultimately, what Wilson’s Rainey wants is respect, and that’s exactly what this film gives her.

—J.D. Considine



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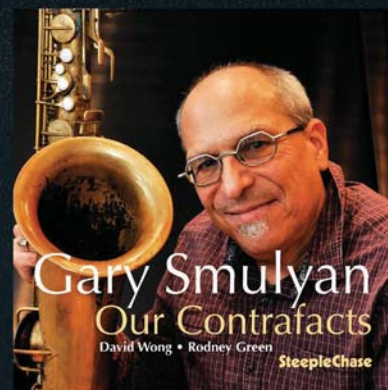
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‘Somewhere, Somebody Has The Blues’

By J.D. Considine Photo by Rory Doyle

If ever there were a time for the blues, it was 2020. In the United States, more than 300,000 died from, and many times more were sickened by, COVID-19, a disease that disproportionately affects people of color.

In its wake, the economy collapsed. Millions lost work, businesses failed, entire industries were shuttered. Although billionaires managed to get richer, the poor and middle class struggled to put food on the table, with long lines at food banks from coast to coast.

The nation endured a deeply divisive election—a fight that continued long after the votes had been counted.

In 2020, the slayings of Ahmad Aubrey (Feb. 23), Breonna Taylor (March 13) and George Floyd (May 25)—and the investigation of police procedures in each incident—led to global outrage. The Black Lives Matter movement pushed civil rights back into the spotlight, sparking protests around the world and making the issue of racial injustice more pressing than it had been since the 1960s.

Any of these events would be enough to inspire several dozen blues songs, and no doubt they have. But because the pandemic’s collateral damage has included the cancellation of festivals and the closing of clubs and concert halls, there’s nowhere for anyone to play or hear those songs.

It’s enough to give the blues the blues.

“Aw, man,” said guitarist and singer Christone “Kingfish” Ingram. “All of this plays to what the blues is: hard times, people getting murdered, life and hardships and whatnot.”



Christone "Kingfish" Ingram



Billy Gibbons

BLAIN CLAUSEN



Shemekia Copeland

MIKE WHITE



Bobby Watson

©MARK SHELDON

Kingfish, as everyone calls him, was sitting at home in Friar's Point, Mississippi, a small town on the Mississippi River just north of the Clarksdale, where blues pioneer Robert Johnson once lived. Kingfish was born in Clarksdale, and apart from being on tour, he has spent all of his 21 years in the region.

He had planned for 2020 to be a busy one. Alligator Records released his debut album, *Kingfish*, in May 2019 to near universal acclaim. Powered by searing guitar work and his preternaturally mature vocals, it topped the Billboard Blues chart, was nominated for a Grammy and was named Album of the Year by the Blues Foundation, one of five Blues Music Awards he took home. Extensive touring was on tap for 2020, including a second jaunt with the rock band Vampire Weekend, but the pandemic put a halt to all that.

"At first, the break was cool," he said over Zoom, wearing a black jersey emblazoned with "KNGFSH," lettered in the style of the classic Run-DMC logo. "But I'm kind of getting like everybody else: I want to be back on the road." Thanks to the occasional streamed performance, he's doing better than a lot of musicians in Coahoma County. "Clarksdale looks kind of like a ghost town," Kingfish said. "They're slowly trying to build up by doing shows here and there, but it's just not the same.

"You need that crowd to connect," he added. "You need that crowd to be there so you can tell their story to them."

It's a line that resonates: *You can tell their story to them*. Unlike rock, where the emphasis is most often on self-revelation or a singer's singular persona, the blues puts the emphasis on shared experience, allowing both artist and audience to transcend pain. "The blues is about life, and it's a universal thing," Kingfish said, matter-of-factly.

"Somewhere, somebody has the blues." He chuckled. "It's always going to be relatable."

"It is community. It's a family," said singer Ruthie Foster, over the phone from her home in San Marcos, Texas. "You run into people who actually cook for you," she explained. "Somewhere in California, I think, this couple brought in this casserole, and they brought in cornbread. They didn't have to do that. We had food in the greenroom, but no, we were family to them, and that was another level. We're all in this together."

From its earliest days, the blues has been communal music, a way of bonding through song in order to transcend the difficulties of life. When the genre originated, there were work songs and field hollers, but also church services, where music was central to the experience of being lifted up beyond this earthly plane. And though this music was intended for the Black community that was making it, it often attracted other listeners along the way. While researching his concert presentation Piedmont Blues, jazz pianist Gerald Clayton discovered that, in the 1920s and '30s, a lot of the music scene in the Piedmont region—particularly in North Carolina—was centered around the tobacco industry.

"I learned about the process of de-stemming tobacco leaves," Clayton said, over the phone from his home in Los Angeles. "There would be mostly African-American women, who would sing hymns while they worked—something like three or four hundred women singing at the same time in a factory. Crowds would gather outside of these factories and just listen to that music."

It wasn't just the sound that attracted them, but also the music's emotional current. For many, the great paradox of the blues is that it's so upbeat. "Somebody said to me when I came to Chicago, 'Oh, you listen to the blues to get rid of the blues,'"

said Alligator Records founder Bruce Iglauer, in a Zoom call from his company's offices in Chicago. "I've even seen this work when people speak foreign languages, and don't even understand all the lyrics. They can still feel that release."

At its best, the blues doesn't simply get rid of sadness, worries and woe; it provides a sense of catharsis, in which those emotions are not just lifted but transformed, providing the listener with joy and hope. And that stems from a different kind of skill than mere music making.

Saxophonist Bobby Watson draws heavily on the blues when he plays jazz, and has on occasion shared bills with blues bands, most notably in 2008, when he toured with blues star Joe Louis Walker under the aegis of the Thelonious Monk Institute. "Part of what makes me creative is playing different repertoire, different selections during a performance, and each one having its own challenge, compositionally, musically, aesthetically," he said, over the phone from his home in Lenexa, Kansas.

"But blues, it challenges you in other ways. Instead of trying to be creative, and not repeat yourself, the challenge is coming right back to the same song form—maybe at a different tempo, maybe in a different key. But it really makes you dig deep, to find out what you have to do to express yourself, to keep yourself interested, and to keep the listener interested as well."

Watson believes there's a different kind of depth to the blues. "Once you start understanding the blues, you can feel a larger arc of life," he said. "The blues can give you wisdom. Part of what it takes for somebody to be able to play the blues is that they have to gain a certain level of wisdom. And if they start younger, they're going to get it sooner.

"Growing up in the church, you have certain songs that you grew up with. But you don't really



Dave Spector (left) and Billy Branch collaborated on "The Ballad Of George Floyd."

start to understand the meaning of them until you've had the trials and tribulations—challenges, obstacles, some twists and turns to navigate—that make you get creative to figure out the solution. It's something that causes you to have patience, or faith. These things have to become something that carries weight in your life.

"Blues is like that: Even if you grow up with it, you still have to grow *into* it to really blossom."

That was certainly true for Foster, whose latest release, *Live At The Paramount*, is nominated for a Grammy in the category Best Contemporary Blues Album. "I got into blues so young, as a teenager," she said. "I got into playing Lightnin' Hopkins, more acoustic-style blues. And then in college, that's when I got into Bobby Bland, and fronting a band." At that point, it wasn't that she identified with Bland's sense of heartbreak and romantic grief. "It was just about the music. Music was cool. And the hang."

As for the feel, like Watson said, it was something she grew into. "I remember coming out of my second serious relationship, and just having such a tough time," she recalled. "Dealing with splitting up, and having a kid between us. I remember putting on a blues [radio station], and T-Bone Walker came on. I don't even remember the song, but it just went right through me, and that was it. It was like another level of realizing this is why I love this music."

"I mean, I was in the worst place ever—feeling guilt, not feeling good about who I was and where I ended up, and what am I to do about my kid? And then this music just pulled me up. It got me off the floor, and I was able to just take one step, and then another step. You just keep playing the music until you go from crawling to running. That's what blues has been for me."

Long a vehicle for expressing personal anguish, the blues also has been a vehicle for topi-

cal songs—a tradition that continued in 2020.

"I saw the video of George Floyd being killed," said guitarist Dave Spector, referring to the horrific incident in Minneapolis. "It was one of the most disturbing videos of police brutality I'd ever seen. ... I just was overcome."

A Chicago native and a fixture on the city's blues scene since the early '90s, Spector decided to express his feelings in music, and began to compose "The Ballad Of George Floyd." The haunting lyrics include these lines: "Under a knee of hatred, George Floyd met his terrible end/ Four-hundred years of the same hate and bigotry yet again/ Blind men in power pouring gasoline on a burning fire. ... We can't let this happen again/ It's time to bring about a change."

"I wrote most of the song just a few days after I saw the video," Spector said via Zoom, from his home on the city's North Side. "And then I wrote the bridge probably a couple of weeks later."

After cutting a demo, it occurred to Spector that vocalist and harmonica wizard Billy Branch would be a perfect duo partner for the song. At 69, Branch is one of the elder statesmen of the Chicago scene, having recorded with the likes of Willie Dixon, Koko Taylor, David "Honeyboy" Edwards and Syl Johnson. "I've known Billy since I first broke into the Chicago blues scene 35 years ago," Spector said. "I met him first as a fan, and then got to know him as a musician."

Spector undoubtedly grasped the symbolic power of having a white musician and a Black musician perform the song as a duet.

"Dave said, 'Hey, man, I've got this song about George Floyd.' And he sent it to me," recalled Branch, joining the videoconference interview from his home on the South Side of Chicago. "He asked me if I'd be interested in collaborating with him on it, and I jumped at the chance. It hit home, really. It captured the essence of the moment."

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Ruthie Foster

Branch found the video of Floyd's death "very traumatic" to watch. "Here, you're seeing, not only in broad daylight—but in front of a crowd of people—what seems to be an institutionalized murder. I mean, here's a man begging, literally begging, 'Just, could you please ease your knee off my neck?'" It was, he said, "like watching some bizarre horror movie." But what made it worse, he noted, was that "from an African American male perspective, there was also this underlying feeling that that could have been me."

Protest songs are hardly unusual in blues. "It's always had that protest vein to it," Kingfish stressed. "There were all the Jim Crow blues songs by Josh White [1914-'69]. Howlin' Wolf did a song called 'Coon On The Moon.' All that, for sure."

"The Ballad Of George Floyd" wasn't the only 2020 blues release to chronicle contentious current events. Shemekia Copeland's ninth album, *Uncivil War* (Alligator), is a collection of politically charged blues songs that addresses everything from gun violence ("Apple Pie And A .45") to gender identity ("She Don't Wear Pink"), to America's divisive politics and history of racism ("Uncivil War"). The program also includes a tune about economic inequality, "Money Makes You Ugly," featuring brilliant guitar work from guest musician Kingfish.

The album offers a devastating snapshot of 2020's hot-button issues, and what makes it all the more amazing is that it was recorded the year before. "Call me psychic or psycho, I don't know,

but this record was finished at the end of 2019," Copeland said, in a Zoom call from her new home in Oceanside, California. "It was supposed to come out early summer, but then with the pandemic, we weren't sure we're going to put it out at all. Then we realized that this record needs to be out and it needs to get heard right now."

Although there's a clichéd notion that blues songs rarely stray beyond romantic laments, the blues always have taken any kind of trouble as their chief topic. "Culturally, that's how it all started," Copeland said. "That's why they called it the blues, because they were talking about uncomfortable subjects. I mean, we've always been through hell, and that has not changed. It's just more people are getting to see it."

Perhaps the most powerful track on *Uncivil War* is John Hahn and Will Kimbrough's composition "Clotilda's On Fire," which addresses slavery's long-lasting impact on America. Although the transatlantic slave trade officially ended in 1808, the hunger of plantation owners for new bodies continued. In 1860, an Alabama plantation owner named Timothy Meaher sent his schooner *Clotilda* to the Kingdom of Dahomey (present-day Benin), with the goal of purchasing 125 captives. To thwart possible prosecution, after the enslaved people had been delivered, Meaher had the ship burned, and it sank off the Alabama coast—where it rested undiscovered until 2018. Some of the people brought over from Africa were alive well into the 20th century. In 1927 and in 1931, author Zora Neale Hurston interviewed one of the survivors, Oluale Kossola (aka Cudjo Lewis), and later began work on a manuscript; it was published as the 2018 book *Barracoon* (Amistad Press).

"That song gets me, and it gives me goose pimples because of the [line], 'We're still living with her ghost,'" Copeland said, her voice heavy with emotion. "That's what bothers me. We shouldn't be still living with this horrible, horrible thing that happened. But it feels like we'll never move on from it, because you first have to accept that it happened. Then you must do something about it. And that has not happened in this country, which is why it keeps rearing its ugly head."

Can the blues be a force for change? Will Black voices be heard?

"I wonder," said Specter. "The audience is by far made up of an older white [crowd], many of whom are probably not terribly progressive."

"Just say it like it is: They are Trumpsters," Branch interjected with a laugh, referring to Trump's supporters. "You've got all this happening, and as Dave just said, most of our audience are older white people. Even as Black artists, that is our audience. And if you really express your political views, sometimes you are met with a lot of pushback. The typical response is, 'Shut up and play. That's your job. Play music, make me dance, and make me smile.'"

Like the world it documents, the blues is

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always changing. In much the same way that rural, acoustic Mississippi blues morphed into the raucous, electric whomp of Chicago blues, today's younger blues musicians are open to new sounds and fresh approaches. Take the mohawk-sporting artist known as Fantastic Negrito, who won the Best Contemporary Blues Grammy for his 2018 album, *Please Don't Be Dead* (Cooking Vinyl). His music owes as much to George Clinton and Prince as it does to Howlin' Wolf or Albert King. On the new album *Kindred Spirits* (Tricki-Woo), the sibling duo Larkin Poe presents an acoustic, slide-heavy sound that works as well on covers of Post Malone and Lenny Kravitz as it does on tunes by Robert Johnson and Bo Diddley.

And even though Kingfish was mocked by hip-hop heads in middle school for being obsessed with something as old as the blues, he sees a blues-meets-hip-hop hybrid as not only inevitable, but natural. "Hip-hop is the great-great-grandchild of the blues," he said. "All of it is Black music. And what people don't get when it comes to rap is, the same way Son House was telling his story, Kendrick Lamar, J. Cole, that's exactly what they're doing—but they're doing it in their form."

In 2018, Kingfish enjoyed a guest spot alongside hip-hop legend Rakim on NPR's Tiny Desk Concert series. He also interpreted the blues classics "The Thrill Is Gone" and "I Put A Spell On You" for the soundtrack album *Luke Cage: Season Two*, a project centered around the work of hip-hop artists Ali Shaheed Muhammad and Adrian Younge.

"One day, I hope to see what can I bring to the table as far as a blues and hip-hop connection," Kingfish said.

The merger of hip-hop and blues may or may not be the music's future, but streaming definitely is, according to Alligator's Iglauer. "It's shifting partly because we're losing all those sales at gigs, which were, for Alligator, close to 10 percent of its annual income," he said. "At the same time, streaming is growing. It's not growing like it is with pop music, because the streaming services are basically pop-oriented. But the great thing about streaming is now the entire Alligator catalog is available to stream in China. It's available to stream in India. It's available to stream across Africa."

Even better, the youth orientation of streaming services has introduced some younger listeners to blues artists. Iglauer cited some listener demographics from Spotify: More than half of listenership for established acts like Shemekia Copeland or Lil' Ed & The Blues Imperials was over 45 years old. Kingfish's biggest audience, however, was the 28 to 34 demographic, followed by 35- to 44-year-olds.

Still, the biggest cloud on the horizon for the blues—for all forms of music—is the pandemic. "I call it the bad dream that hasn't gone away yet," said guitarist/vocalist and ZZ Top cofounder Billy Gibbons, over the phone from Los Angeles. At the time of the interview, he was days away from flying to Austin, Texas, for his annual holiday gig called the Jungle Show. In previous years, it's been a two-night engagement at the legendary blues venue Antone's, but the 2020 version was a single performance, documented via livestream. "We're going to give it a shot, and everyone's excited—we can work together."

For Gibbons, live performances are essential. "You know, the bands want to get to work," he said. "The managers want their bands to work. The booking agents want the bands to work." And, of course, the audience yearns to attend concerts again.

Gibbons mentioned that singer/guitarist Jimmy Vaughan recently had played a trio show in a huge hall in Texas that, thanks to pandemic restrictions, allowed entry to only 75 patrons. Gibbons asked him what it was like: "He said, 'We couldn't see past the front row. We just carried on like the room was packed, and it was great. The enthusiasm was in the air.' So, I took that as pretty indicative of just how ravenous people are to get back into being entertained.

"Everybody's waiting for the curtain to rise," he added. "In the wake of these last eight months, there's been a lot of introspection. Just about every sector of every society around the globe has a new appreciation for what was and what is. When the sun rises, it'll fall on a different landscape—which I think is a good thing."

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Ed Palermo Big Band

RUN WITH IT!

By Ed Enright

Photo by Chris Drukker

Ed Palermo's namesake big band has earned a reputation as a virtual circus of jazz-rock medleys, mashups, jump-cuts and other spirited musical mischief.

Rightly so. For more than 25 years, the alto saxophonist and arranger has led his 17-piece, New York-based ensemble with humor, wit and a passion for repertoire that extends far beyond the big band canon.

"Medleys and mashups—that's my thing," Palermo said during a mid-November phone call from his home in West Orange, New Jersey. Prior to the pandemic, the Ed Palermo Big Band had been playing once a month at Iridium in Manhattan, and every other month at The Falcon in Marlboro, New York. Since becoming famous for its Frank Zappa tribute shows at The Bitter End starting in 1994, the group has accumulated a vast book of madcap arrangements that incorporate everything from Zappa's infamously quirky pieces to classic jazz compositions and Palermo's own originals.

Palermo also has charted hundreds of songs by British rock bands, many of which appear on the double album *The Great Un-American Songbook Volumes 1 & 2* (Cuneiform, 2017). His new release, *The Great Un-American Songbook Volume 3: Run For Your Life* (SkyCat), focuses mainly on songs by The Beatles, whose music, like Zappa's, helped shape Palermo's eclectic tastes early on.

These days, Palermo, 66, is content to be working as an educator, first and foremost. He teaches at Jazz House Kids in Montclair, New Jersey, and Hoff-Barthelson Music School in Scarsdale, New York, in addition to giving private lessons via Zoom and FaceTime. But his love for rein-

terpreting songs by his heroes continues to fuel his restlessly creative spirit.

"Ed has boundless energy and an unbelievably creative mind," said Matt Ingman, who has played bass trombone and tuba in Palermo's big band for 22 years. "He's like a mad scientist, putting the most unlikely tunes together to create some absolutely brilliant mashups."

"Ed loves being the center of attention and is forever trying to make us and his audience laugh," said bassist Paul Adamy, who's been with the ensemble since 1994. "Ed once went as far as completely shaving his head to get into character [as the supervillain Ernst Stavro Blofeld] for a James Bond-themed show."

"I think my presence in the band has served as an enabler for Ed's weirder side in our live performances," said Bruce McDaniel, who has played guitar and sung with the band for 15 years. "Giving him somebody to play off as either straight man or fool has opened up a can of worms that can't be closed. This era of Ed's band began as a way for him to open people's eyes to the hidden beauty in so much of Zappa's music by recontextualizing it. But it has shifted into much more of a window into Ed's mind, which is a cluttered, random, bizarre locale, but an interesting place to visit."

"Playing Ed's arrangement of 'Come Together' is what I imagine it must be like to step into his brain for a minute," said violinist Katie Jacoby, who joined the band in



Palermo has been known to embody a larger-than-life persona during his big band's live shows.

2010. “There’s so much going on simultaneously, and it all fits together perfectly like a puzzle.”

Conversing with Palermo is like embarking on a long, exhilarating adventure through the interconnecting back alleys of his mind, as he casually pinballs from one topic to the next and back again. The following interview has been edited, reshuffled, pitch-corrected, torn apart and stitched back together for the sake of length, clarity and everyone’s sanity.

WALK US THROUGH THE PROCESS OF CRAFTING A GOOD MASHUP.

I think everyone has that particular syndrome where one song reminds them of another. Then, what I do is, instead of ignoring it, and seeing it as a nuisance or an oddity, I run with it. And I work up a mashup of it. It’s not just to be clever, and not just to surprise audiences, even though that’s a big, fun factor of it. Ultimately, it can become bigger than the sum of its parts.

On *The Great American Songbook Volumes 1 & 2*, we do the Beatles’ “Don’t Bother Me.” And while I was arranging that, Miles Davis’ “Nardis” came to mind. So, on that album I have a medley of “Don’t Bother Me” plus “Nardis.” And that was strictly that melodic line, plus the fact that it’s in a minor key.

Another example would be from the new album, where I mash up the Beatles’ “Fixing a Hole” with Frank Zappa’s “Let’s Move To Cleveland.” I don’t remember exactly what made me think that one would work with the other, but as I was arranging the two, and I was getting really into the arrangement—particularly towards the end where it just keeps building and building and layering the melodies on top of each other—I realized I’d got into something pretty big, pretty epic. And so, what I’m trying to get at here is to make that mashup greater than the sum of its parts. As I arranged, I knew I was onto something. We performed that mashup for more than a year before we ever recorded it. Every time we did it live, some-

thing magnificent was happening.

Other songs on the new album fit that description, like our mashup of Zappa’s “Moggio” and the Moody Blues’ “Nights In White Satin.” I’ve always wanted to do “Nights In White Satin,” but I didn’t want to do it just like the Moody Blues, because they already have the definitive version. It’s one of my favorite songs, ever since I was in high school. So, just messing around on the piano and playing the chords of “Moggio,” I heard the melody of “Nights In White Satin” in my head.

When we were rehearsing the “Nights In White Satin” and “Moggio” thing, I remember looking at the musicians and thinking, “I can’t believe how this is making me feel.” I mean, when you have a band of tremendous musicians who are taking an arranger’s idea and making it work on epic levels, it is the most gratifying thing there is in life.

I COULDN’T HELP BUT NOTICE ON YOUR ARRANGEMENT OF THE MOODY BLUES’ “NIGHTS IN WHITE SATIN” THAT THE PERSON DOING THE SPOKEN-WORD PART (“BREATHE DEEP THE GATHERING GLOOM ...”) TOOK SOME LIBERTIES WITH THE WORDS AND ADDED SOME SNIDE ASIDES.

In real life, his name is Jim Mola, and he’s a great drummer, singer and voiceover actor. And he has an alter-ego by the name of Mike James. When he’s in character, he wears a fat suit and puts on a really bad toupee, and he is basically a Frank Sinatra wannabe. And a long time ago I thought, “We’ve got to work that into the act.” So, he’s been on several of our albums in a humorous context. My first idea for the “Nights In White Satin” recitation wasn’t Mike James. It was Gilbert Gottfried [*imitates the comedian’s nasal voice*]. I thought that’d be so funny. But I couldn’t reach him. I tried.

Then I said, “Well, Mike James will be great for that.” It’s a perfect example of what my band is about, how we don’t take ourselves so serious-

ly. Our live shows are filled with self-deprecation, and political humor, too. We’re not about to let the last four years get by without constant ridicule. Some of it’s spontaneous, and most of it is in the music itself. Every live show we do is not only different musically, but it has a different, funny theme.

IN ADDITION TO COVERING THE BEATLES AND OTHER BRITISH INVASION BANDS EXTENSIVELY, YOUR GROUP HAS PERFORMED AND RECORDED A RIDICULOUS NUMBER OF FRANK ZAPPA TUNES. TALK ABOUT HOW ZAPPA’S MUSIC HAS INFLUENCED YOU.

Frank Zappa was known—and rightfully so—for being hysterically funny. And he put it in his music. He even has an album called *Does Humor Belong In Music?* Now, of course, my answer to that is, why wouldn’t it? All music is just a reflection or celebration of life. But that’s not everyone’s thing. So, it’s my thing. But what surprises some people is that my humor is totally different than Frank’s. Zappa’s humor was very rarely self-deprecating, and mine is almost *always* self-deprecating. The beauty of it is that no one gets hurt.

When I saw Zappa for the first time in 1969, in Philadelphia, I was in ninth grade, and it changed my life. He’d be playing some song, he’d put his hand up and *boom*, on a dime, the band would go into something totally different. That type of thing has a comedic element, but also it’s exciting. You know, “How did you do that?” So, I would say that the “anything goes” concept was 100% influenced by Frank Zappa.

LET’S GET BACK TO THE BEATLES. HOW DOES ONE TRANSLATE THEIR BRAND OF ‘60S BRITISH POP-ROCK INTO A BIG BAND ARRANGEMENT?

One of the first Beatles songs that I arranged years ago, prior to doing any Frank Zappa arrangements, was “I Wanna Be Your Man.” Now, right off the bat, the melody as written is somewhat syncopated. So that helps, right? And it’s a relatively simple chord progression.

Once you have something like that, and you’re not encumbered by the harmony, you’re thinking more of the melodic line. So, what I did in that situation was I played off the melody and had other syncopated lines on top of the Beatles’ original melody. Now, as an arranger, you can make your own chords, which I did a little bit of in my first arrangement of “I Wanna Be Your Man.” But you have to watch out for that. And this is where it becomes very subjective. Once you start adding fancy-pants chords to a song that you love as it is, then you run the risk of condescending to the song. I never want to do that.

So, if you’re applying Beatles music to a big band, one way to do it is to have a song that’s mainly melody and groove, and add cool melodic counter lines.

WHAT ABOUT A MORE COMPLEX BEATLES SONG LIKE "STRAWBERRY FIELDS FOREVER," WHICH APPEARS ON THE NEW ALBUM?

Once again, I didn't want to condescend and add a bunch of B.S., because I thought the harmony was perfect as it is. I stayed true to the harmony. But then I decided that I was going to segue into the Frank Zappa song "Shove It Right In." Just to give you an indication about how interchangeable my whole concept is: "Shove It Right In" used to be part of a medley with "Let's Move To Cleveland." But on the new album, "Let's Move To Cleveland" is hooked up with the Beatles' "Fixing A Hole." So, these are all really interchangeable, which is another concept I got from Frank Zappa. Zappa saw his whole body of work as one piece. And you could take one bit of that and put it anywhere else. He had a name for it.

DO YOU MEAN "MODULAR"?

Yes, exactly. The part of his concept that I completely embrace is where you take every thing that you do, and you can plug it in somewhere else. If I'm noted for anything, among people who follow my music, it's that.

One of my favorite parts of my "Strawberry Fields" arrangement is, at some point, the bass starts playing a line that goes [vocalizes a funky vamp]. Now, most people won't get that, but that's Jimi Hendrix's "Little Miss Lover." There's a lot of things like that. In my "Nights In White Satin" arrangement, for several bars, I throw in the bass line to "Whipping Post" by the Allman Brothers Band. A lot of these things aren't necessarily caught by the audience. Now, I do have some fans who hear everything, but you don't have to recognize every thing that I came up with to enjoy it.

WHO ARE THESE SO-CALLED "FANS" YOU SPEAK OF?

It's not your typical jazz audience. There are jazz enthusiasts in the audience, and it is still primarily a jazz big band. We're always breaking into some, usually fast, jazz things. We play a lot of jazz, but I wouldn't say that we have the same audience as the Village Vanguard. A lot of my audience, they love Maria Schneider, as do I. Her music is as good as it gets. But the thing that my fans really like is the fact that we do so many songs. And none of my songs are ever more than three minutes long before I go into something else.

When I first started the band, I used to write these long, epic things like Maria does. But one thing I've realized is that over the years, my passion for music has only grown, but my attention span is short. And how I set up my shows is a reflection of that.

The way I think about it: *Seinfeld* was made up of these really tiny scenes. And then, the genius was how it made for this hilarious and unpredictable convergence at the end. That's

exactly how I see what I do, both in live performance and on the new album. It's like one long suite, but the thing that we end with will always have something to do with how we started.

DO YOU GET SATISFACTION FROM YOUR CREATIVE ENDEAVORS?

If I was ever going to write a book, the theme would be: "How to be a happy musician without being famous." Because, you *can* be. I am proof that it's possible, as long as you

resign yourself to the fact that you're not gonna be doing it for a living. Life is short, and we're learning that now more than ever. So, I'm going to have as much fun as possible. And it has nothing to do with trying to become famous.

I'm blessed I can teach and make a living that way. My wife and I are both on Medicare and Social Security now—we're both old enough that I don't have to try to pretend to be anything. And I get to play different music all of the time. This is the life. **DB**



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Aum Fidelity has issued a 10-disc box set of previously unreleased music by bassist William Parker, titled *Migration Of Silence Into And Out Of The Tone World*.

William Parker

EVERYTHING THAT'S BEAUTIFUL

By Dave Cantor Photo by Michael Jackson

A tangle of connections fosters the bounty of William Parker's career. The bassist—who's released a 10-album set called *Migration Of Silence Into And Out Of The Tone World* that features more than a dozen musicians—is New York's free-jazz caretaker, a performer who frequently forges symbiosis on and off the bandstand. And he's been doing it for almost 50 years.

"It's the sound community of William Parker," said vocalist Lisa Sokolov, who first met the bassist in the mid-1970s and appears on the Aum Fidelity box set. "If it wasn't for William, a whole lot of us would be in really sad shape.

"He's kind of a force of enormous beneficence for a group of musicians who he has supported over decades and decades. And as people get older, he's there for people in such a huge way. He's visiting people; he's doing people's memorials. He's just a great beneficent force that helps create and sustain a group of musicians in a field that is not in other ways supported by the world."

That assessment of Parker's place in the community is demonstrated by his vast list of associations, stretching from past icons like pianist Cecil Taylor and saxophonist David S. Ware to contemporary avant-gardists like pianist Matthew Shipp, and his own groups, In Order To Survive and The Little Huey Creative Music Orchestra. The bassist's creative life, though, began during his Bronx childhood, when a young Parker's imagination scraped the sky in a sort of nascent mindfulness practice.

"I don't meditate or anything—just the daily observance of any-

thing that's beautiful," the bassist said over Zoom in November from his home on New York's Lower East Side. "I've been doing it all my life, since I was a kid, which is looking at the sky—cloud gazing, because in New York, there weren't any stars. ... Just looking at the sky and getting to see the birds. My first connection with poems was the idea that birds are poems in the sky. And that kind of imagery, I've used in a couple of songs. That imagery, it's very strong."

Almost anything can be folded into jazz, and the bassist has images, melodies, rhythms and stories tucked away in his mind, ready to emerge in flashes of inspiration.

"I guess I was 11, 12, 13—around then. I'd just sit back and look at birds. Now, there weren't that many birds in the city—you had pigeons and you have flocks of low-flying birds. And some of the last concerts I did, I [played] some compositions that I had been singing since I was in the Bronx as a kid. They keep coming back," Parker, 68, said. "One composition we did, I was in Germany, and I had a dream that my father came to me, and he showed me these hieroglyphic graphic scores. He said to me, 'I'm a composer, also.' I woke up in the middle of the night and I wrote down what I remembered of the images. And we played that



Rob Brown (left), William Parker and Gerald Cleaver perform in October at Vision Festival: Healing Soul.

music the next day.”

Not all of Parker’s music is so immediate. For *Tone World*, the composer meticulously planned for combinations of players, sounds and instruments. But Parker doesn’t perform on a significant portion of the box set—and when he does, he often is playing an instrument other than bass. The approach is equal parts artistic direction and selflessness, as he nurtures a cohort of complementary musicians who have formed a synergistic relationship with him.

“Well, the music was written for the players who played it,” he said. “It was almost like I was a director filming a movie, and they were the actors who were interpreting the script and shooting the scene; each song was a different scene that they were bringing life to. I played on some things, but it just happened to be that it was a lot of material, and they had to bring it to life. That was the vision, for them to bring it to life, not for me to bring it to life. Now, when it came to certain things where I had to bring it to life, then I would play. ... I’m there when it’s called for.”

Parker didn’t think he was a necessary part of *Child Of Sound*, the second disc of the *Tone World* set, where pianist Eri Yamamoto lithely approaches 14 solo compositions the bassist penned. It’s a patient respite following some of the tense moments on the set’s first disc—though both recordings present music that, upon first listen, some might not attribute to Parker’s free-world orchestrating.

Yamamoto glides through the pensive yet overwhelmingly melodic piece “Mexico,” a tune that benefits from a strong left hand, Parker’s personality as a bassist coming

through. There’s another composition with the same title on the set’s sixth disc—also called *Mexico*, a recording that fits more into expectations of Parker’s outside sound, and features vocalist Jean Carla Rodea as its centering force.

With immigration a topic at the forefront of American politics, Parker weaves in references to people’s agency and free movement a handful of times across the massive set.

“It hasn’t ever really been dealt with, internment camps for Japanese Americans during World War II,” Parker said, alluding to *Manzanar*, another disc in the box set, and the resurfacing theme of freedom. “I didn’t think about that, but there is a connection there. ... [T]here’s a connection between all the albums.”

Recordings and performers are laced together across Parker’s lengthy career. And the idea of an elemental creative spirit being at the core of humanity has flitted through the bassist’s mind for just about as long as he’s been gazing up at clouds. He’s even developed a phrase to conjure the idea, one only obliquely referenced in the box set’s title: *Migration Of Silence Into And Out Of The Tone World*.

“‘Universal tonality’ has to do with, if you took musicians from all around the world who play different music, and you said, ‘OK: 1, 2, 3, let’s play.’ You don’t have to say anything. You could just play, and it would come together. The same way as if you brought dancers, and you started playing music, and everybody started dancing—the way kids play, that’s universal tonality,” Parker explained. “I mean, you don’t have to know everyone’s language. Everyone can speak their own language and still be able to communicate. ... It’s just about being able to respect each other and learn how to live here

on the planet and acknowledge all the differences that we have, and yet also embrace who you are without sacrificing anything.”

Decades of exploration inform Parker’s work across *Tone World*, the set’s title intimating a wide-angle expansiveness, roomy enough for traditions and ideas from around the globe. One disc—*The Majesty Of Jah*—references the Rastafarian godhead. *Harlem Speaks* examines the legacy of the Harlem Renaissance. And *Lights In The Rain (The Italian Directors Suite)*, where Parker plays cornet, threads classic reels of film through the bandleader’s understanding of the world.

As sprawling, both instrumentally and compositionally, as *Tone World* might seem, Parker hasn’t finished exploring the outer reaches of his practice.

“Part of me is still looking for an instrument that’s non-Western; I like non-Western instruments that are not based off of the piano, but based off the human voice, the human tuning and human feeling. It moves away from European classical music,” Parker said. “And there’s nothing wrong with European classical music, except it’s like wearing a suit: Not everybody in the world has to wear a suit. You have to wear the clothing that’s comfortable to you, that has color and it has meaning to you. So, I prefer to embrace things that are open to me, and that I feel an affinity for.”

“The trumpet was the first instrument I played when I was 7 to 8. Then the trombone and cello. And I’ve revisited the trumpet since the 1970s, I’ve been revisiting the tuba, and added the bamboo flutes and *shakuhachi*. And then I picked up flutes along the way. The double reeds, I started in the ‘80s and had a very good relationship with them. It’s great to have a primary instrument and then have other colors and other instruments that you can play for a certain result.”

The bandleader has stories about sifting through bags of flutes and Don Cherry introducing him to the *donso ngoni*, an instrument akin to an African harp that Parker plays on the box set. But mastery of an instrument isn’t always top of mind for him. He seems to prioritize the ability to shuttle one’s own personality through a set of chosen strings or reeds—and finding like-minded performers who can help along the way.

“You have to master your connection with music. They say Miles Davis would hire people if you could play one sound, and that sound was something that Miles could use, and was useful to him,” Parker said. “If you’re in an orchestra and just play the triangle, it’s whether you can create magic or magic can come through you.”

Pianist Cooper-Moore—a regular member of the In Order To Survive ensemble who’s worked with the bassist since the early ‘70s—

said he doesn't recall going in to record *The Majesty Of Jah* disc for the box set. The pianist just readily answers Parker's calls and works to contribute his own aesthetic to each project.

"He creates beautiful music. That's all you can say. I mean, that's why we're put here, to create beauty," Cooper-Moore said. "William says, 'How can two people play so differently and come together?' He says, 'He plays beautifully and he plays beautifully. So, beauty plus beauty is beauty.' This is William."

The pair helped record one of Ware's earliest dates, which was released in 1979 as *Birth Of A Being*. But by then, Parker had begun to establish himself in the avant-garde world, recording with saxophonist Frank Lowe and other luminaries. The institutionalization of jazz was well underway by that point—and to some degree, free-improv had been subsumed by noisy expectations. The music's bifurcation didn't go unnoticed.

"They kind of pan left and right on you, but they really don't know what you do. At the same time, when we were in Europe, when I used to play with David S. Ware or even Cecil Taylor, and you go to the major festivals and some 'straightahead guys' would be sitting at the breakfast table," Parker recalled. "We'd come down to breakfast and they'd say, [*lowering his voice*] 'Hey man, these cats—you're playing the real music. I wish we could do that.' What does that mean? We're playing the real music? So, what are they playing? That always got me: They felt that they wanted to do something, but they weren't allowed to because they had a role to play. And they weren't allowed to just fly.

"When you fly, you don't get any publicity, you don't make any money, you don't get a recording contract with a major label. You don't get to play the club. So, they have to do what they do in exchange for success. And we do what we do because we have to do it. We have a calling. It's a mission. It's a cry."

Patricia Nicholson—the founder of Arts For Art, which presents the avant-focused Vision Festival—has played a significant part in the bandleader's efforts to carve out his own tone world. The fest, which has run annually since 1996, has provided hundreds of musicians a platform that might have been unthinkable otherwise. It's also connected the bassist, who has played every edition of the event, with a wending network of performers, all given to the same exploratory inclinations he's exhibited throughout his career.

"The reason it was called the 'Vision Festival' is that everyone has a vision," said Nicholson, who's been married to Parker since 1975. "We're wanting to shine a light on the fact that people have visions, and that they are individual lights and if we keep them separat-

ed, they get lonely—they're easily blown out. But if you're surrounded by all these different lights and visions, you inspire each other, and you'll hold each other. And the music and the idea of having a vision, it stays strong."

The festival, which was streamed online in early October, helped reaffirm a strain of the music, Nicholson said. And while she and Parker remain dedicated to the freedom of improvisation, the planning and organizational feats each has undertaken continue to sustain the art form.

"I think it's helped launch careers," Parker said of the festival. "We used to do a thing with the Sons d'Hiver festival in Paris, where there'd be a Vision stage, and Patricia would bring over a whole evening of [performances] to Paris, and it was great. ... I just wish there was a Vision Festival in every state. It would be so wonderful. I mean, you know this one standard [idea of music that] exists in America? If there's more than one kind of person, you know there's more than one kind of music." **DB**

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CLARA FERREIRA

Jane Ira Bloom's most notable contribution to *Celestial Mechanics* is her bluesy flight on Thelonious Monk's "Crepuscle With Nellie."



M'Lumbo & Jane Ira Bloom *Celestial Mechanics*

ROPEADOPE 597

★★

The use of spoken-word samples as a sonic or thematic element in music has a rich history, and has risen to impressive heights with David Byrne and Brian Eno's *My Life In The Bush Of Ghosts* and Jason Moran's "Ringing My Phone (Straight Outta Istanbul)." But overdone, samples can grow as stale and cloying as a comedy routine. And used with as much abandon as M'Lumbo displays, the technique can overwhelm the music and turn cacophonous.

Cacophony is a polite word for pieces like "Grand Funk Railroad," one of several live cuts on *Celestial Mechanics*. There are so many intersecting components—more than a dozen musicians and various samples—that it's difficult to determine a single dominant musical motif, and the sound mix is so muddy that the result seems like an audience bootleg. The use of that venerable power trio's name as a title also is about as sophisticated a joke as Frank Zappa's "Don't Eat The Yellow Snow."

In another nod to the '70s, the ensemble

tackles the theme to the TV detective drama *Hawaii Five-O*, which is launched by what sounds like a sample of Lon Chaney Jr.'s Wolf Man character, before steering briefly into the Morton Stevens title song. The theme shifts toward a bossa nova feel—albeit shattered by multiple samples, including some random manic laughter. But there's no unifying concept or solos. A similar approach is applied to a 15-minute version of the theme to the TV show *Sesame Street*, with Joe Raposo's song appearing only briefly and serving as a jumping-off point for a jumble of disconnected musical gestures and half-realized ideas. The most developed of these is a short-lived bleating flute, unless you count the repeated appearance of John Lee Hooker's voice, reminding listeners that he's the Boogie Man.

So, what is Jane Ira Bloom—she of crystalline soprano saxophone tone and an interest in expressing the beauty of abstract art and the solar system—doing here? It's difficult to tell, considering how buried she usually is in the bombast and bombardment of one-line interjections. Her most notable contribution is a bluesy flight on an otherwise plodding version of Thelonious Monk's "Crepuscle With Nellie," which opens with two minutes of meandering percussion and

electronics before getting to the timeless melody.

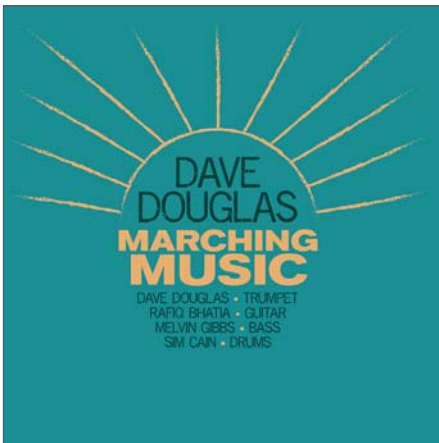
If M'Lumbo has an antecedent, it might be The Residents—the mysterious art-music group rumored to have its roots in mid-'60s Louisiana. But while The Residents were never less than sharp-edged in their musical pastiches and postmodern sendups, M'Lumbo dulls its impact with half-cooked satire, compositions that fail to evolve into anything of interest and a sonic blend that sounds like mush.

—James Hale

Celestial Mechanics: Disc One: Wyoming; All This Is True/ Brainspotting; Riot Of The Glands; Death Valley Sunset Remix 2020; Time Square/The Most Fantastic Machine; Unconscious Forces Remix 2020; I Am The Musical Scale Of Today; Rock Around The Clock Remix 2020; Facetube; Crepuscule With Nellie Remix 2020; Hawaii Five O Remix 2020. Disc Two: Lesbian Techno; Yes, We Can Remix 2020; Grand Funk Railroad; Time Square Remix 2020; It Remix 2020; The Most Fantastic Machine Remix 2020; Mister Johnson; Terrible Days Of The Phonograph Remix 2020; Drivin' Along In Radioland Remix 2020; This Is The Other Place/ Always Looking Forward To Tomorrow; Sesame Street Remix 2020. (58:10/59:02)

Personnel: Robert Jordan Ray Flatow, keyboards, keyboard bass, suitcase symphonetta, ectoplasmic radio, percussion, vocals; Lord Cecil Young, trumpet, percussion; Jane Ira Bloom, soprano saxophone, electronics; Vincent Veloso, alto saxophone, flute, keyboards; Paul-Alexandre Meurens, tenor saxophone, flute, bass clarinet, oscillator, guitar, ectoplasmic radio; Andrew Hadro, baritone saxophone; Brian O'Neill, guitar, guitar synthesizer, ectoplasmic radio, percussion; Page Hamilton, guitar; Emanuel Ruffler, James McClean, keyboards, ectoplasmic radio; Dehnan Duckworth, Maureen "Mo" O'Connor, Eduardo Guedes, percussion; Jaz Sawyer, drums.

Ordering info: ropeadope.com



Dave Douglas
Marching Music
GREENLEAF MUSIC 1078

★★★★½

Listening to Dave Douglas' *Marching Music*, one can't help thinking he composed the songs in a state of depression, perhaps convinced that Donald Trump would win a second term as president. How else to account for the slogging, foreboding darkness that pushes against the martial optimism usually anticipated in such music? Maybe, this is Douglas' march to Dante's *Inferno*.

For a man who has bestowed dedications to intellectual provocateurs from Hannah Arendt

to Noam Chomsky, the trumpeter has made himself a patron of eclectic expectations. But it's appropriate to mention Trump here, since Douglas' mission on *Marching Music* is one of social justice; to create music to ring in your earbuds when you demonstrate in your next voting-rights march. This places the album at a distance from Sousa in a tradition of jazz protest pioneered by Roach, Mingus and Coltrane. But his politics are oblique—no overt ideology is built into Douglas' music beyond song titles and their inherent pessimism. His political intent is clear, but shouted from the sidelines.

From the first notes, his music emits a spooky, dirge-like gravitas, often accompanied by booming stings of impending danger. Douglas is the principal acoustic voice, cradled in the electronic thunder of bass and guitar. It is a clear and fluent voice, though, that in the end puts music above politics. His trumpet has a statuesque dignity weaving into Rafiq Bhatia's echoey lines on "Parables" and a pearly muted discretion on "Ten To Midnight." The only time the music seems to crack a smile and get some pep in its step is on "Foley Square," where Douglas is at his most nimble in the lower register. —*John McDonough*

Marching Music: Parables; Ten To Midnight; Whose Streets; Fair Fight; Safe Space; Climate Strike; Forlorn; Lenape; Foley Square; Persistent Hats. (59:05)

Personnel: Dave Douglas, trumpet; Rafiq Bhatia, guitar; Melvin Gibbs, bass; Sim Cain, drums.

Ordering info: greenleafmusic.com.

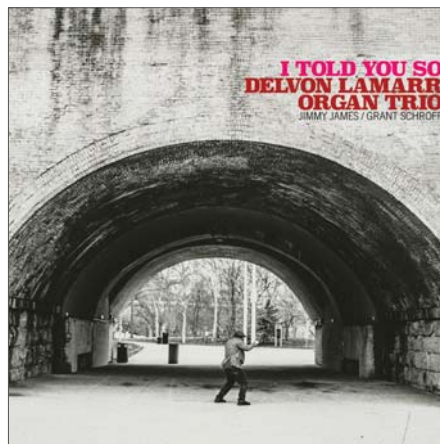
Delvon Lamarr
Organ Trio
I Told You So
COLEMINE 12028

★★★★★

There is something undeniably funky about the organ. Its unwavering sustain and percussive potential has led the likes of Jimmy Smith and Booker T. Jones—and more recently Cory Henry—to its keys for deep-swinging compositions. Delvon Lamarr is the latest in this line of formidable players, turning to the mercurial instrument to channel the sounds of Stax, Motown and the blues through its tonewheel.

For his second album with the trio, *I Told You So*, Lamarr digs deep for a collection of nine inescapably joyous and in-the-pocket numbers. Opener "Hole In One" sets the tone with its rhythmic interlacing of Jimmy James' high-register guitar with Grant Schroff's pinpoint-precise drumming, while Lamarr's own playing meanders from an interlocking left-hand bass to a sweeping, open right hand full of melody.

Despite the record presenting as a relatively straightforward affair, subtle chameleonic elements emerge. On "Aces," James channels Hendrix-style distortion during a roaring solo, while Schroff provides an impeccable Bernard Purdie-esque drum break. And for a cover of



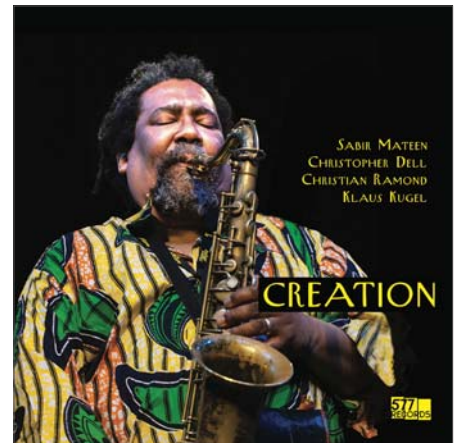
George Michael's "Careless Whisper," Lamarr's organ pad provides an unexpected backing, reframing the melody with ambient texture.

I Told You So is not a daring, experimental work, yet faultlessly achieves what it sets out to do. Lamarr harnesses the power of his instrument to provide an album of new jazz-funk standards, an exuberant celebration of three musicians working at the height of their powers. —*Ammar Kalia*

I Told You So: Hole In One; Call Your Mom; Girly Face; From The Streets; Fo Sho; Aces; Careless Whisper; Right Place, Right Time; I Don't Know. (41:26)

Personnel: Delvon Lamarr, organ; Jimmy James, Ben Bloom (8), guitar; Grant Schroff, drums.

Ordering info: coleminerecords.com



Sabir Mateen
Creation

557 RECORDS 5820

★★★★

A onetime member of Horace Tapscott's Pan-Afrikan Peoples Arkestra and a fixture on the New York free-jazz scene, reedist Sabir Mateen recently has been exploring the potential of electronica, working with synthesist William Simone on 2016's clangorous *Joys!*, and overdubbing Sun Ra-schooled Farfisa onto 2020's *Survival Situation*. *Creation*, however, moves in the opposite direction, offering a thrashing, wailing throwback to the avant-garde sound of the late 1960s.

Recorded in Berlin before a small but enthusiastic audience, the album finds Mateen backed by a trio of German performers and playing in a style that offers no regular pulse, no melodic themes and no obvious structure. The album is one continuous performance of "Creation," which is split into two parts on the 47-minute CD, plus a third section on the 71-minute download. It's not clear whether that title refers to the act of improvisation or the universe itself.

Regardless, Mateen is manically intense throughout, with lots of vocalized altissimo—sometimes shrieking, sometimes wailing. But the emphasis is on sustained tones, jarring honks and simple lines; there are no "sheets of sound" here.

Bassist Christian Ramond and drummer Klaus Kugel largely do the free-jazz thing, stressing disjointed lines and polyrhythmic accents over a steady pulse, but do briefly settle into a nice, swinging groove behind vibraphonist Christopher Dell midway through part two. Dell, meanwhile, is the star of the show, dropping cool, probing chords behind Mateen's eruptions, and generally serving as an anchor to Ramond and Kugel's rhythmic explorations.

—*J.D. Cosidine*

Creation: Creation (Part One); Creation (Part Two); Creation (Part Three). (71:25)

Personnel: Sabir Mateen, tenor saxophone, vocals; Christopher Dell, vibraphone; Christian Ramond, bass; Klaus Kugel, drums.

Ordering info: 577records.com

The Hot Box

Critics	J.D. Considine	James Hale	Ammar Kalia	John McDonough
M'Lumbo & Jane Ira Bloom <i>Celestial Mechanics</i>	★★½	★★	★★★	★
Dave Douglas <i>Marching Music</i>	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★½	★★★½
Delvon Lamarr Organ Trio <i>I Told You So</i>	★★★	★★★½	★★★★	★★★
Sabir Mateen <i>Creation</i>	★★★	★★★	★★★★	★½

Critics' Comments

M'Lumbo & Jane Ira Bloom, *Celestial Mechanics*

There's a difference between being ambitiously eclectic and hopelessly cluttered, and this lands on the wrong side of that divide. The hectoring samples I can forgive. The lumbering, muddy groove, I can't. —*J.D. Considine*

At times overwhelmingly dense and impenetrable, fusionists M'Lumbo and Bloom find their sweet spot when they pare down their myriad influences, channeling a Moby-esque meditative dance music through jazz on "Yes, We Can Remix 2020" and "Mister Johnson." —*Ammar Kalia*

Sound design is the hook in this kaleidoscopic hall of altered audio mirrors. Surrealistic sampling targets icons from The Muppets to Monk with a vaguely psychedelic smirk. —*John McDonough*

Dave Douglas, *Marching Music*

Douglas' back-of-the-pocket phrasing sounds great with this fusion-flavored group, and Bhatia's coloristic guitar is the ideal foil for the dramatic stomp of Cain's drumming. But it's Gibbs' gorgeously distorted bass that puts an edge on the sound, underscoring the music's political bent. —*J.D. Considine*

This is strident, dramatic music for Trump's final days. Tough but tender, thanks to the sonic contrast between Gibbs' stormy bass and the leader's uplifting trumpet. —*James Hale*

Douglas provides a spirited collection of protest music, reflecting 2020's sombre moods, as well as offering some hope through the clarion call of his horn. Bassist Gibbs provides a gritty backing, while guitarist Bhatia paints with subtle electronic manipulations. —*Ammar Kalia*

Delvon Lamarr Organ Trio, *I Told You So*

Guitarist James' fondness for ratcheting up the volume adds edge to an otherwise traditional organ-trio sound. But the leader's solos favor the soul side of soul-jazz to the point that we're often left with more gravy than meat. —*J.D. Considine*

Greasy to the max, the trio creates a compelling amalgam of Lamarr's beefy organ tone, Schroff's unyielding minimalism and—particularly—James' Steve Cropper-cum-Jimi Hendrix phrasing. —*James Hale*


With its funky vamps and jabbing ostinatos, this trio is sure to get any party on its feet and moving. The music is simple, tight and relentless, mostly in orbit around Schroff's cracking backbeats. Not a lot to think about or get in the way of its sheer hustle. —*John McDonough*


Sabir Mateen, *Creation*

Creative drumming is everything in free-improv, and Kugel brings it throughout. Dell's vibes provide an engaging contrast, but interest lags when the quartet steps back from its full-scale sonic blitz. —*James Hale*


A liquid, deeply felt exploration of improvisation from Mateen. Dell's melodic flurry rallies against the leader's piercing interruptions to make for an enthralling listen. —*Ammar Kalia*

Great improvisation wrestles with limits. This marathon of feral shrieks takes us to an old but still alternate jazz reality where limits are excused, so that all comers are revered. Maybe the emperor needs a new tailor. Dell's vibes provide some respite. —*John McDonough*

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Cory Henry
Something To Say
 CULTURE COLLECTIVE 0004

★★★★½

Organist and singer Cory Henry fuels *Something To Say* with the best strains of classic '70s soul, delivering a fetching album that emits feel-good energy, even during these times rife with racial injustice. Like many soul pioneers, Henry knows how to balance seemingly anodyne, amorous songs with cuts that seethe with social criticism. And like his forebears, Henry's apt at synthesizing gospel, jazz and r&b into a holistic sound.

The album kicks off with "Don't Forget," a

smooth Chicago-style stepper that reveals Henry's fondness for Stevie Wonder's harmonic language. Lyrically, the song establishes the album's initial optimistic outlook, the vibe carrying over to the entrancing medium-tempo "Happy Days." *Something To Say* generates more power, however, on its darker cuts. The bewitching ballad "Icarus" points in the direction of Childish Gambino, especially with the harrowing theme of falling from dreamy aspiration to bitter reality. The song also marks a thematic shift for the album, as the material grows more political—notably the somber "Black Man" and cinematic "Say Their Names."

As an artist who's progressed from journeyman organist for artists like Yolanda Adams and Snarky Puppy, Henry slowly is cultivating an identifiable voice that elevates him well beyond session-player status. On *Something To Say*, his graceful juxtaposition of themes never comes off preachy or treacly. The music is a testament to his prowess as an instrumentalist, bandleader and songwriter, because it engages without blaring its importance.

—John Murph

Something To Say: Don't Forget; Happy Days; GawtDamn; Switch; Anything 4 U; Rise; Icarus; No Guns; Black Man; Say Their Names; Dedicated. (43:02)

Personnel: Cory Henry, organ, vocals; Nicholas Semrad, keyboards; Van Hunt, Adam Agati, Jairus Mozee, Sharrad Barnes, guitar; Sharay Reed, Burniss Earl Travis II, bass; Jahi Sundance, sampler; Taron Lockett, drums; Denise Renee Stout, Tiffany Stevenson, vocals.

Ordering info: cultureco.com



Theo Bleckmann & The Westerlies
This Land
 WESTERLIES 002

★★★★

On *This Land*, The Westerlies, an impeccably calibrated brass quartet, continues to stretch our understanding of musical inventiveness. This time, the pair of trumpeters and trombonists join forces with vocalist Theo Bleckmann on a program that alternates between stirring protest songs and soothing palliatives.

Bleckmann transforms Joni Mitchell's "The Fiddle And The Drum" from a folksy ballad into a harmonically refined duet between voice and horns, and his ominous twist on "Look For The Union Label" alludes to labor disenfranchisement that belied the chirpiness of the 1970s jingle. Then, in segueing from the latter into a dissonant rendition of "Wade In The Water," the group limns a disturbing correlation between enslavement and persistent social disparities.

In their originals, the group's message is no less pointed. On "Land," trombonist Andy Clausen presses for a reckoning with historical wrongs through rhythmic insistence and an accelerating tempo. Similarly, on "Looking Out," trumpeter Riley Mulherkar's rueful theme, melodic allusions and spoken-word sections recall the horrors of Executive Order 9066, which incarcerated Japanese-Americans during World War II. Around these compositions, the quartet revels in sparkling instrumental renditions of Woody Guthrie tunes like "The Jolly Banker." Rousing and majestic, these interludes (less than a minute each) hint at the exhilaration of righteous struggle. But "Thoughts And Prayers" plainly asserts the album's position: "It is time to be the change," Bleckmann sings.

—Suzanne Lorge

This Land: The Fiddle And The Drum; Land; Two Good Men; Another Holiday; Tear The Fascists Down; Look For The Union Label; Wade In The Water; The Jolly Banker; Grandmar; In The Sweet By And By/The Preacher And The Slave; I Ain't Got No Home In This World Anymore; Das Bitten Der Kinder (Recitation); Das Bitten Der Kinder; Looking Out; Thoughts And Prayers. (45:22)

Personnel: Theo Bleckmann, vocals, electronics; Riley Mulherkar, Chloe Rowlands, trumpet; Andy Clausen, Willem de Koch, trombone.

Ordering info: westerliesmusic.com

Tim Berne/ Matt Mitchell Duo
Spiders
 OUT OF YOUR HEAD U004

★★★★½

A series of direct-to-digital releases meant to capture jazz "in the wild," Out Of Your Head's "Untamed ..." series is one of the best ideas to have emerged from jazz's indie underground in a while. Tim Berne's participation is no surprise, given the DIY ethic of his own imprints, but the release of *Spiders* is especially satisfying given the bright light it shines on the reedist's gifts as a composer.

Consisting of five new works by Berne, *Spiders* was recorded live in February 2020—a prepandemic last gasp. It's a duet with longtime collaborator Matt Mitchell, and the connection between the pianist and saxophonist is astonishing. Not only do Mitchell's voicings deftly illuminate the harmonic ideas suggested by Berne's motivic writing, but his assertive left-hand lines and insistent counterpoint lay out the music's rhythmic content so clearly that there's no need for bass or drums.

But the best thing here is how tightly intertwined the writing and improvisation are. "Increminced" is filled with moments when the two momentarily fall into unison, then break



into elaborately woven variations, while "Julius" (a tribute to Berne's mentor, saxophonist Julius Hemphill) uses its probing theme as a latticework to support the players' tuneful extrapolations and dramatically shifting dynamics.

Like the best chamber music, *Spiders* manages to be both compositionally intricate and conversationally intimate, a combination that rewards repeated listens.

—J.D. Considine

Spiders: Increminced; Purdy; Julius; The Rose Charade; Seemly. (43:49)

Personnel: Tim Berne, alto saxophone; Matt Mitchell, piano.

Ordering info: outofyourheadrecords.com

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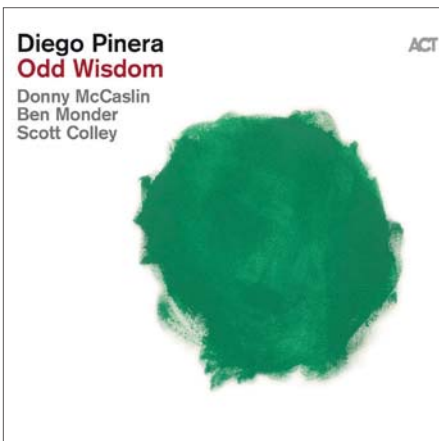
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Diego Pinera *Odd Wisdom*

ACT 9920

★★★★½

Uruguayan drummer Diego Pinera has followed an accretive path, studying music in the States, Cuba and Germany, the country he's called home since 2003. Now based in Berlin, Pinera has compounded his mastery of jazz and Latin-American music with Eastern European traditions through his work with performers from Greece and Bulgaria. And for his latest album, he visited New York to work with a band that brings a dazzling cogency to his multicultural post-bop vision.

New Faces *New Sounds*

POSI-TONE 8214

★★★½

Posi-Tone's appreciation of traditional jazz structures, arrangements and modern perspectives is embodied with bold clarity on *New Sounds*. Label head and producer Marc Free's New Faces ensemble offers a fresh cast for this second installment of the series. Careful consideration of each player's strengths and how they complement one another gives the record the air of an all-star lineup, even if individually, each player still is solidifying their identity amid an early stage of their career. Still, fleeting gatherings of musicians aren't always an indicator of chemistry.

The players here craft unique hooks, each turning to different preferences for tonality, tempo and rhythmic flow on the album's five original works. Where tenorist Nicole Glover's bustling "Blues For Tangier" opts for a vintage, somewhat loose tonality, drummer Cory Cox's "Luna Lovejoy" instead relies on much more defined, pointed melodic movement and crisper delivery. But small issues accrue across *New Sounds*, leaving an initially engaging experience spotty with cracks. The trumpet and saxophone harmonies on "Afloat" seem to have trouble getting their alignment just right. Meanwhile, the

Saxophonist Donny McCaslin has favored an airless fusion sound since he worked with David Bowie on the singer's final album, *Blackstar*, in 2016, but here his stunning lyrical imagination sparkles. Guitarist Ben Monder also excels, especially on "Clave Tune," where he nails the corkscrewing unison melody, but also adds lovely bossa nova-like comping and coloristic washes against the theme's Afro-Cuban groove.

The real credit, though, belongs to the leader, who composed everything here apart from "Blue Monk." Pinera is a seriously skilled drummer (his solo on "Mi Cosmos" is a jaw-dropper); his writing is complex; and the band consistently brings a breezy quality to the performances, never drawing attention to the difficulty of the material. On the ballad "Conversation With Myself," the leader gamely takes a backseat, coaxing splendid improvisations from McCaslin and Monder. "Domingo" pivots between a skittering unison melody and slinky folk-flavored refrain, and on "Space," Pinera contributes endearing vocals that convey a Latin pop fluency. The drummer's previous efforts have been solid, but his personality has never emerged so strongly before.

—Peter Margasak

Odd Wisdom: Clave Tune; Domingo; Conversation With Myself; Robotic Night; Mi Cosmos; Space; Away; De Madrugada; Easter In Puglia; Blue Monk. (57:06)

Personnel: Diego Pinera, drums; Donny McCaslin, saxophone; Ben Monder, guitar; Scott Colley, bass.

Ordering info: actmusic.com



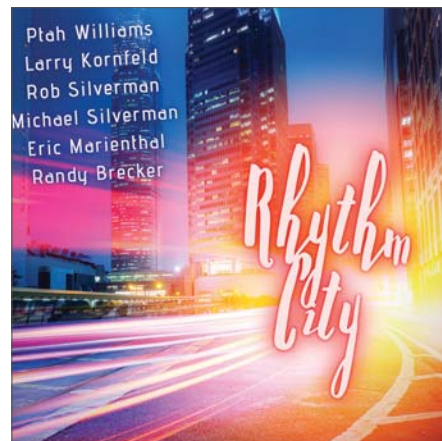
rhythmic support on "Hold My Heart" goes from pleasantly surprising to distracting. Dismissing these blemishes, the record's mix leans high and bright. Though this gives parts like the opening drum solo on "Stop Gap" enjoyable clarity, the piercing sonic profile can take its toll, diminishing the album's overall pleasures and leading to a sometimes strained listening experience.

—Kira Grunenber

New Sounds: Shades Of Brown; Whistleblower; Afloat; Stop Gap; Hold My Heart; Second Wind; Blues For Tangier; Luna Lovejoy; Runaway; Trapezoid. (53:46)

Personnel: Brandon Lee, trumpet, flugelhorn; Markus Howell, alto saxophone, flute; Nicole Glover, tenor saxophone; Caili O'Doherty, piano; Adi Meyerson, bass; Cory Cox, drums.

Ordering info: posi-tone.com



Rhythm City *Rhythm City*

AUTUMN HILL

★★★★

Rhythm City, an album from the eponymous St. Louis jazz stalwarts, is less an update and more a rearticulation of fusion. What began as a jam session at keyboardist Michael Silverman's studio morphed into something larger when pianist Ptah Williams stopped by. As they started playing, they started recording, and *Rhythm City* was born.

It was their first time playing together, but the album evinces a real chemistry. Across a handful of Thursday morning jam sessions, the trio recorded more than 30 tunes; *Rhythm City* comprises eight of them. Unsurprisingly, it is Williams, a true virtuoso, who takes center stage on several tracks. The first tune they recorded was the Freddie Hubbard classic "Little Sunflower," where Williams offers a driving solo announcing the group's presence. But there are other moments where Williams—whose first name, Ptah, is from the Egyptian deity responsible for creation—provides the integument for his bandmates. In their rendition of Wayne Shorter's "Virgo Rising," Williams brings us along forcefully and slowly, as if the tune is being transmuted into a ballad. But then the intensity of Silverman's playing and the consistent pacing of Larry Kornfeld's bass summon both reprieve and resolution.

On the only original piece, "Just Like Us," Eric Marienthal's soprano saxophone and Randy Brecker's trumpet provide a glimpse into how a more crowded session might have sounded. In the future, we could still get to hear more of that originality. But if the cover of Curtis Mayfield's "Pusherman" is representative of what is to come, there is much to anticipate in *Rhythm City*'s reinterpretation of music that covers all of jazz and the worlds beyond.

—Joshua Myers

Rhythm City: Chameleon; Just Like Us; Little Sunflower; Nature Boy; Pusherman; Spain; Virgo Rising; Well You Needn't. (74:09)

Personnel: Ptah Williams, Michael Silverman, keyboards; Larry Kornfeld, bass; Rob Silverman, drums; Eric Marienthal (2), soprano saxophone; Randy Brecker (2), trumpet.

Ordering info: autumnhillrecords.com



Guy Mintus Trio *A Gershwin Playground*

ENJA 9683
★★★★½

When performing standards, one can elicit smiles of recognition by conforming to expectations. It's easy, if not especially daring. Or you can take chances, challenge yourself to find some new angle on the tune while risking a pratfall.

Guy Mintus doesn't just cross the line, he obliterates it. His bold reimaginings of each track, animated by his brilliant sidekicks, take listeners on a rocket ride to heights where they can see these tunes as if for the first time. Repeated plays reveal a profound adaptability to Gershwin's writing, repertoire the Israeli pianist said is "relevant, multi-layered and full of possibilities."

On "Summertime," the trio sprints into the beloved ballad at a burning tempo, cooking up an incongruous blend of funk and Latin ingredients. In his vocal, Mintus follows his own course, with modal, Middle Eastern nuances complementing the melody. From there, they race through a fun house of colors and surprises, with the bandleader creating a unison piano/scat solo that pushes the tune even further. These fireworks ultimately illuminate the spirit of the composition; it's irreverent and reverent at the same time.

The revelations keep coming: the wordless wailing that begins "I Loves You Porgy," the unexpected straightahead treatment of "They Can't Take That Away From Me" (which showcases Omri Hadani's bass), and the wild accelerando and crashing finish to "Let's Call The Whole Thing Off." But "Rhapsody In Blue" lingers. On his own, Mintus plays a fantasia, slipping from written to improvised passages, including a furious fusion of stride and klezmer. Pure and simple, it's a tour de force.

—Bob Doerschuk

A Gershwin Playground: Let's Call the Whole Thing Off; Fascinating Rhythm/I Got Rhythm; The Man I Love; It Ain't Necessarily So; I Loves You Porgy/Prayer For Healing; They Can't Take That Away From Me; Someone To Watch Over Me; Rhapsody In Blue; Summertime. (47:06)

Personnel: Guy Mintus, piano, vocals; Omri Hadani, bass; Yonatan Rosen, drums.

Ordering info: enjazazz.de/index-1.htm

Tori Handsley

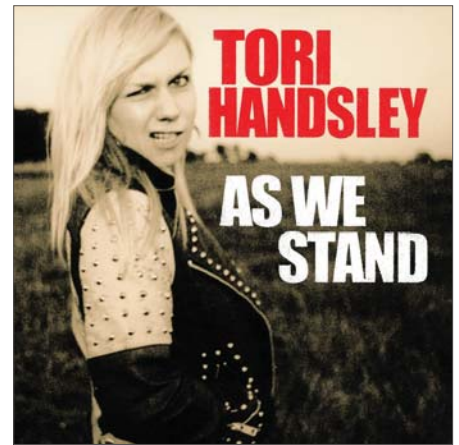
As We Stand

CADILLAC 019
★★★★½

With *As We Stand*, Tori Handsley's debut leader date, the electric harpist, keyboardist and vocalist stares down the future with a hard-hitting trio every bit as committed to her vision as she is.

As a major force on the U.K. scene, which frequently melds jazz with electronica and post-rock soundscapes, Handsley's played with a host of notables, from Shabaka Hutchings and Nubya Garcia to Yussef Dayes and Evan Parker. But she really hits her stride with drummer Moses Boyd and bassist Ruth Goller, both longtime collaborators.

With "What's In A Tune," the album's final track, Handsley rails against today's toxic environmental landscape, sometimes explicitly with her lyrics. On "As We Stand," the opener, she invokes "the power of nature's voice," while the keening lament "Out Of Sight, Out Of Mind" takes on the gluttonous who "Gorge as we forage/ Consume and discard." Elsewhere, the music itself is the message. On "Polar Retreat," you literally hear fragile polar ice caps melting, while Handsley's electrifying harp shoots the rapids and the trio navigates through the oft-polluted "Rivers Of Mind."



Though not every track packs the punch augured by the "What's In A Tune" single, that's mostly by design. For in lamenting what we're losing or already have lost, Handsley also pays tribute to what remains. "Kestrel" invokes the Mauritius kestrel, one of conservation's few success stories, which almost went the way of the dodo but now is "Flyin' high/ Over time/ Space breathes/ At your feet." —Cree McCree

As We Stand: Rivers Of Mind; Convolution; Polar Retreat; Out Of Sight, Out Of Mind; Home; Settling Into The Sun; Intwinning; As We Stand; Kestrel; What's In A Tune. (61:51)

Personnel: Tori Handsley, electric harp, piano, vocals; Ruth Goller, bass; Moses Boyd, drums; Sahra Gure (4, 8, 9), vocals.

Ordering info: cadillacrecords77.com

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Adam Rudolph *Focus And Field*

META 025

★★★★

Much of percussionist Adam Rudolph's recent work with his pan-cultural Go: Organic Orchestra has embraced voluminousness. But for *Focus And Field*, his octet trades in more intimate interactions, instead of sweeping gestures.

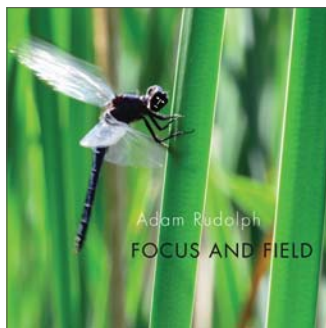
Recorded at New York's Roulette venue weeks before the pandemic shuttered the city, the album was captured with impressive clarity and permits the listener to tune into the music's contrasting elements. Rudolph leads the group—which combines players of Japanese and Korean traditional instruments with American jazz and classical musicians—through pieces that draw upon conventionally and graphically notated scores. The expansions and contractions of energy derive from Japanese gagaku music and Noh theater; Sumie Maneko's vocals, which occupy the foreground of the lengthy first section, come from that tradition. But the Asian elements are only part of the action. Woodwinds form a brooding chamber ensemble as Rudolph's hand percussion tends to the boundaries between sections. The point does not seem to be mixing cultural elements so much as appreciating the fact that they can coexist. The result is a series of individually exquisite passages that don't quite hold together.

—Bill Meyer

Focus And Field: Tsuzumi; Focus And Field; Mu Wi. (45:11)

Personnel: Adam Rudolph, handrumset; Sumie Maneko, vocal, koto, shamisen; Stephanie Griffin, viola; Kaoru Watanabe, shinobue, noh kan, fue, percussion; gamin, piri, saenghwang; Sara Schoenbeck, bassoon; Ned Rothenberg, shakuhachi, bass clarinet; Ivan Barenboim, B-flat clarinet, contra-alto clarinet; Michel Gentile, C flute, alto flute, bass flute, bamboo flute.

Ordering info: metarecords.com



Jihee Heo *Are You Ready?*

OA2 22185

★★★★½

Pianist Jihee Heo has a beautiful legato touch that builds on sturdy lyricism and lustrous harmonies—but her work also is filled with delicate, detailed figures. That alone would be enough to carry a recording, but the fine *Are You Ready?*

reinforces it with two more extraordinary elements. First, her compositional voice—she wrote all eight of the album's tracks. And second, a remarkably tight and interactive trio with bassist Marty Kenney and drummer Rodney Green.

Heo's composing, of course, is an extension of her playing. Yet, it also proffers another layer of intrigue. On the ballad "Dark And Light," that intrigue takes the form of a beguiling chord sequence that's as surprising and suspenseful as a good improvisation. "Blurring The Blues," the album's second and best track, finds Heo taking a strident cooker of a solo. Throughout, Green and Kenney seem to anticipate her every move, whether it's Green getting ahead of a quick eighth-note salvo or Kenney intuiting a chord substitution she's about to play. Yet, as if to prove her self-possession, the pianist closes the album with the unaccompanied "Letter To A Little Girl"—at least as powerful and moving as anything else on *Are You Ready?*

—Michael J. West

Are You Ready?: Are You Ready?; Blurring The Blues; Dancing In The Sorrow; Dark And Light; Streams In The Desert; Trust; Oh, New York; Letter To A Little Girl. (34:52)

Personnel: Jihee Heo, piano, vocals (1); Marty Kenney, bass; Rodney Green, drums; Saidu Ezike, vocals (6).

Ordering info: originarts.com



The Kaleidoscope Quintet *Dancing On The Edge*

DOT TIME 9097

★★★★½

"There are four qualities essential to a great jazzman: taste, courage, individuality and irreverence," Stan Getz reportedly once said. *Dancing On The Edge* hits on all four of those requirements as saxophonists Joe Lovano and Dave Liebman lead an ensemble through a live date captured in 2013 at Pennsylvania's Deer Head Inn.

For the performance, each member of The Kaleidoscope Quintet brings fluency in the jazz tradition, as well as a taste for abandon. On "Get Me Back To The Apple," Liebman strikes a balance between bebop and the fearlessness of the avant-garde, while on "Topsy Turvy," Judi Silvano's expressive vocalizations add levity and highlight her scat vocabulary. That latter tune also showcases Lovano and Silvano's simpatico, particularly when they trade fours with Liebman. Most emblematic of the in-sync imagination displayed across *Dancing On The Edge* is the ensemble's striking rendition of "There Is No Greater Love." The melody is familiar, and then, like the kaleidoscope the band's named for, the quintet obscures it with a twist of colorful reinvention. It's a nuanced move that seemingly separates great jazz players from the pack.

—Alexa Peters

Dancing On The Edge: Topsy Turvy; Day And Night; Blackwell's Message; There Is No Greater Love; Get Me Back To The Apple. (62:04)

Personnel: Joe Lovano, tenor saxophone, flute; Dave Liebman, tenor saxophone, soprano saxophone, flute; Judi Silvano, vocals; Tony Marino, bass; Michael Stephens, drums.

Ordering info: dottimerecords.com



Tino Contreras *La Noche De Los Dioses*

BROWNSWOOD 0239

★★★★

Tino Contreras, 96, is the latest musician connected to U.K. tastemaker Gilles Peterson who will turn heads. In Mexico, the drummer attained luminary status for albums that blend bebop and modal jazz with shades

of Afro-Latin, Middle Eastern and exotica. But for those unfamiliar with Contreras, *La Noche De Los Dioses* makes for an agreeable introduction.

Underpinning the album with themes about Aztec mythology, his hypnotic homages to various deities play into the current renaissance of spiritual jazz. The enchanting title track—where Contreras pays tribute to Coatlicue and Huitzilopochtli—is a composition he penned in the 1970s. Some psychedelic touchstones of the era heard in music by Santana and Luis Gasca radiant throughout, but with less emphasis on pyrotechnics. By stressing Contreras' dreamy melodies and rhythms, the music luxuriates in the timbre of individual voices, particularly saxophonist Luis Calatayud—whose vinegary tenor tone recalls Gato Barbieri's early years. The mystique of the music, however, wears thin. Themes concerning Aztec emperors certainly titillate, but the music doesn't rise to such transcendent heights.

—John Murphy

La Noche De Los Dioses: La Noche De Los Dioses; Máscaras Blues; Naboró; Malinche; El Sacrificio; Al Amanecer; Niña Yahel. (41:05)

Personnel: Tino Contreras, drums; Luis Calatayud, soprano saxophone, tenor saxophone, conch shell, ocarina; Valentino Contreras, electric bass; Jaime Reyes, keyboards; Emmanuel Laboriel, electric guitar; Marco Gallegos, acoustic guitar; Eduardo Flores, bongos; Carlos Icaza, harmonic arps, percussion.

Ordering info: brownswoodrecordings.com



**Elvin Bishop
& Charlie
Musselwhite**
100 Years Of Blues
ALLIGATOR 5004
★★★★



Decades of commitment to the blues gets seniors loads of respect. It gets them a free pass, too, with undeserved praise lavished on mediocre performances. But Elvin Bishop and Charlie Musselwhite, both a few years shy of 80, are deserving of accolades.

Friends since the 1960s when on the Chicago blues scene, they hadn't made a full album together until now. The two are masters of style, delivery, ironic humor, dramatic flair and an instinctive understanding of 12-bar music. There's a poignant directness to the lead vocals by the pair, whether it's Musselwhite wisely sizing up of his life on "Blues For Yesterday" or Bishop slathering "Birds Of A Feather" with communicative good vibes. The lyricism of Musselwhite's harmonica is striking in its weight and knowledge throughout, and first-rate guitarist Bishop plays with real feeling. There's a lean intensity to the music here, knocking the accumulated dust off songs by Sonny Boy Williamson, Roosevelt Sykes and Leroy Carr, plus confidently handling eight of their own songs. All told, their flame is far from extinguished.

—Frank-John Hadley

100 Years Of Blues: Birds Of A Feather; West Helena Blues; What The Hell?; Good Times; Old School; If I Should Have Bad Luck; Midnight Hour Blues; Blues, Why Do You Worry Me?; South Side Slide; Blues For Yesterday; Help Me; 100 Years Of Blues. (52:19)

Personnel: Elvin Bishop, guitar, vocals; Charlie Musselwhite, harmonica, vocals, slide guitar (4); Bob Welsh, guitar, piano; Kid Andersen, bass.

Ordering info: alligator.com

**Papo Vázquez
& Mighty Pirates
Troubadours**
*Chapter 10:
Breaking Cover*
PICARO
★★★★



Papo Vázquez's Mighty Pirates Troubadours are stirring. The precise, greased-gear ensemble moves through smartly arranged,

post-boppishly interpreted jazz with a Latin tinge, and the first six tracks here all are highlights. The swirling syncopations, tart horn hooks and earthy choruses bind in a way almost scientifically refined over decades: The ballad and blues add variety, but it's the bomba, plena, mambo and rumba efforts that distinguish *Chapter 10: Breaking Cover*.

The Troubadours lay down grooves, Sherman Irby—alto saxophonist and the album's co-producer—slips into step on three tunes, and Antonio Caraballo's guitar adds frosting to the fusion-adjacent "Fairmount Park." *Breaking Cover* has an immediacy to it, having been recorded during a brief window in pandemic restrictions. "No Te Rindas" ("Don't Give Up") and "Broke Blues" nod to current events; others offer complex concepts and foreboding airs, and seem to speak of troubled times. Yet, treasured tunes here transcend all of that.

—Howard Mandel

Chapter 10: Breaking Cover: Mr. Babu; NY Latin Jazz Mambo; El Cuco/The Boogeyman; Saludo Campesino; Fiesta En La Salse; Fairmount Park; Shadows; No Te Rindas; Broke Blues. (49:02)

Personnel: Papo Vázquez, trombone, vocals, percussion keyboard; Ivan Renta, tenor saxophone, soprano saxophone; Sherman Irby, alto saxophone; Rick Germanson, piano; Ariel Robles, bass, vocals; Dezron Douglas (9), bass; Alvester Garnett, drums; Antonio Caraballo (6), guitar; Antoine Drye (9), trumpet; Carlos Maldonado, Reinaldo DeJesus, Jose Mangual Jr., percussion, vocals.

Ordering info: papovazquez.com

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The Experience In Paradise

As fascinating as it is to hear *Live In Maui (Experience Hendrix/Legacy Recordings/Sony Music Entertainment 19439799042; 51:34/48:45 ★★★★★)*, a thrilling document of a July 1970 **Jimi Hendrix Experience** performance for a few dozen fans in a pasture situated near the Haleakala Crater, the story of how this show came to pass is perhaps even more captivating.

Hendrix, drummer Mitch Mitchell and bassist Billy Cox had a Honolulu stadium gig and some much-needed downtime in Hawaii on their schedule. But instead of relaxing, the trio were coaxed by manager Michael Jeffrey into taking part in *Rainbow Bridge*—a cockamamie, independent art film—and playing a hastily assembled gig as part of what was dubbed a “vibratory color/sound experiment.”

What maybe helped convince the band to brave 30 m.p.h. winds and a gaggle of people grouped together by their astrological signs was that Jeffrey got Reprise Records to fund the construction of Hendrix’s Electric Lady Studios. Or maybe—according to interviews with Chuck Wein, the film’s director, on the DVD accompanying this multidisc set—the guitarist was on board with connecting the “enlightened and unenlightened” via that “rainbow bridge.”

Whatever the case, Hendrix and the Experience gave their all at this unusual gig, which stretched over two sets—one that stuck to familiar tunes like “Foxy Lady” and “Purple Haze,” and another that highlighted material the group recorded for what would have been its fourth studio album. Footage from the performance wound up in the finished film—which also featured a wonderfully grouchy cameo from Hendrix—but, strangely, the 1971 soundtrack was made up entirely of unused studio material.

There’s a notable looseness to the first set that only becomes more pronounced as it moves through its 10 tracks. Mitchell’s playing gets especially ragged, with awkward fills and his struggling to find the downbeat on “Lover Man.” The drummer’s work wasn’t helped by technical issues with the original multitrack recordings and the raging winds that affected several songs. (Mitchell later would rerecord the drum parts for several songs that feature in the performances here.)

By the second set, a measure of stiffness creeps into the group’s playing, underlining how new some of these songs were to the trio. The Experience is still comfortable enough turning “Hey Baby (New Rising Sun)” and “Midnight Lightning” into



Jimi Hendrix

COURTESY EXPERIENCE HENDRIX

a medley on the fly, but the punch and swing of funk-infused rockers like “Dolly Dagger” is tempered. The trio also occasionally loses sight of the finish line, as an otherwise wonderful take of “Straight Ahead” seems to crumble toward the end.

There’s definitely something admirable about the Hendrix estate’s willingness to put their name on this warts-and-all document. That decision was made a lot easier thanks to Hendrix’s stellar work here. Even at its shaggiest, his playing is never anything less than electrifying. He especially excels on the slow blues numbers: His solo on “Hear My Train A-Comin’” starts off humbly before he unfurls a furious squall of notes and fuzzed-out chords; and the band’s churning version of “Red House” is filled with the guitarist’s quick melodic curlicues and playful energy.

Whether Hendrix was onstage that afternoon as a favor to his manager or to be part of this proto-New Age experiment can’t ever be made clear—even with the filmed concert footage. What does come across as loudly as the music is just how much he loved playing with Mitchell and Cox, and how much Hendrix enjoyed performing for an audience. When he’s not completely lost in the music or plucking out a solo using his teeth, he looks entirely joyful.

Hendrix’s death less than three months later might cast some small shadow on the ebullience displayed here, but don’t let it linger. Put these discs on repeat and soak in every moment like an afternoon in the Hawaiian sun.

DB

Ordering info: jimi Hendrix.com



The Awakening Orchestra volume II: to call her to a higher plain

BIOPHILIA 0020

★★★★★

At various points of this tour de force, composer Kyle Saulnier and his Awakening Orchestra brilliantly signify the chaos America is enduring—socially, politically and economically.

Parsing individual tracks on *volume ii: to call her to a higher plain* isn’t the best way to evaluate this symphonic palette, as it morphs from one mood to another. It has to be heard as a dramatic whole, reeling from collective crescendos, delightful fugues and sonorous interludes—especially the saxophone on “i can see my country from here, i. free labor, free land, free men.” The succeeding movements where flights of flute blend with piano and saxophone are beautifully rendered, delicately balancing the piece’s surge of power. But the music is never more potent than on “to call her to a higher plain, first cadenza,” Brooke Quiggins Saulnier’s violin passages leaping from hoe-down to hallelujah.

In effect, this is a Great American Songbook of another order. And while it references several specific themes inherent in our culture, the ensemble captures an epic, sweeping sound in a quest to reach a higher realm. —Herb Boyd

volume II: to call her to a higher plain: prelude & fanfare—the patriot; burn; throughout; i can see my country from here, i. free labor, free land, free men; i can see my country from here, ii. liberté, égalité, fraternité; i can see my country from here, iii. ethos, pathos, logos; i can see my country from here, i can see my country from here—epilogue; i remember; to call her to a higher plain, i. on the technicians of power; to call her to a higher plain, first cadenza; to call her to a higher plain, ii. on the acceptance of things that we can not change; to call her to a higher plain, second cadenza; to call her to a higher plain, iii. on the changing of things that we can not accept; the desc/dissent; lux aurumque. (113:55)

Personnel: Kyle Saulnier, conductor; Remy Le Boeuf, soprano saxophone, alto saxophone, flute; Vito Chivuzzo, alto saxophone, soprano saxophone, flute, alto flute, clarinet; Samuel Ryder, tenor saxophone, soprano saxophone, flute, clarinet; Andrew Gutauskas, baritone saxophone, soprano saxophone, flute, bass clarinet; Felipe Salles, baritone saxophone, tenor saxophone, soprano saxophone, flute; Daniel Urness, Seneca Black, Nadje Noordhuis, Pablo Masis, trumpet; John Yao, Michael Fahie, Samuel Burtis, James Rogers, trombone; Michael Caterisano, vibraphone; Michael MacAllister, guitar; Aaron Kotler, keyboards; Joshua Paris, bass; Will Clark, drums; Seth Fruiterman, Julie Hardy, Nathan Hetherington, vocals; Brooke Quiggins Saulnier, violin.

Ordering info: biophilarecords.com

Doxas Brothers *The Circle*

JUSTIN TIME 8624

★★★★

Like most musically gifted siblings, Chet and Jim Doxas share the kind of deep bond that only brothers have. And they further explore that innate chemistry in the company of longtime collaborator and fellow Montréaler Adrian Vedady on bass and veteran pianist Marc Copland.

The band opens on a mellow note with the rhythmically swaying “Uno A La Vez,” which introduces Chet’s searching, keening tenor and Copland’s impressionistic instincts. The peaceful “Temporal” starts with Chet blowing in a more deliberate fashion atop Jim’s gentle brushwork. Vedady offers a melodic moment before Copland brings a spiky dissonance to the proceedings in his solo. As the piece builds toward a tense peak, Chet unleashes considerable chops, overblowing with authority. The strolling “A Word From The Wise” carries an old-school charm, despite Copland’s harmonically provocative comping and soloing. Elsewhere, they collectively push the envelope on “Objets Nécessaires,” summon the spirit of Ornette Coleman on “Joan’s Song” and introduce a touch of New Orleans second line on “Another Soap Box.” A sublime yet subversive note closes the disc with a gentle reading of Gordon Jenkins’ melancholy gem “Goodbye,” where Copland reharmonizes with impunity.

—Bill Milkowski

The Circle: Uno A La Vez; Temporal; Fourteen Daughters; Old Sport; A Word From The Wise; Objets Nécessaires; Joan’s Song; Another Soap Box; Goodbye. (61:12)

Personnel: Chet Doxas, tenor saxophone; Marc Copland, piano; Adrian Vedady, bass; Jim Doxas, drums.

Ordering info: justin-time.com



David Lord *Forest Standards Vol. 2*

BIG EGO 010

★★★½

The smartest players are those who welcome a challenge, be it diving into a new session or welcoming collaborators to prod them on. Guitarist David Lord embraced both while writing and recording his second full-length, *Forest Standards Vol. 2*.

Alongside drummer Chad Taylor and vibraphonist Sam Hake—both a part of the first *Forest Standards* release—Lord included a couple of surprising picks to fill out his ensemble here. Bassist Billy Mohler, best known as a session player for acts like Kelly Clarkson and Liz Phair, was the wild card. But he slips comfortably into the stream of these songs, adding strains of dissonance along with a steady pulse. Where Lord truly took a risk was bringing in another guitarist. Jeff Parker’s work on eight tracks provides a perfect counterpoint to the bandleader, be it the sharp electric flutters set alongside the acoustic melody of “An Amanita” or the warped clouds of color he floats on “Pin Oak.” Parker and Taylor’s inclusion also feels like a tacit acknowledgment of how Chicago’s creative music scene has inspired Lord, though it’s an influence that weighs him down. As talented as Lord is, his next challenge, it would seem, would be to embrace other enclaves of players and sounds, and see where they take him.

—Robert Ham

Forest Standards Vol. 2: Cloud Ear; Humble Mushroom; Pin Oak; Tubifera; Turtle Mushroom; Conifer Tuft; Epiphyte; Red Bananas; An Amanita; Coltricia; Blue Morpho; Nectaries; Mossy Maze Polypore; Purple Polypore. (37:59)

Personnel: David Lord, guitar, acoustic guitar, classical guitar, glockenspiel; Jeff Parker, guitar; Billy Mohler, bass; Sam Hake, vibraphone; Chad Taylor, drums.

Ordering info: musicfrombigego.com



Emily Kuhn *Sky Stories*

BACE

★★½

For her leader debut, Chicago trumpeter Emily Kuhn offers up a project of mostly originals, showcasing sonic combinations as varied as the horizon—and as promising as her talent. It suffers, though, from the inclusion of a few too many ideas.

Sky Stories features a pair of Kuhn’s collectives—Helios, her chamber-jazz ensemble, and a pared-down quartet—supporting the bandleader’s evocative vocals and melodies. Kuhn’s stated objective here was to celebrate Chicago’s diverse musical communities, and she deftly uses the broad palette of instrumentation to reach her goal. The album opens with the lush “Roses,” featuring Helios, which blossoms into a full-blown bossa nova. As the tune goes on, more colors—a saxophone solo, a string soli—add sublime innovation and intensity. That said, *Sky Stories* would benefit from moments of simplicity—a refinement of each composition and the project, overall. Kuhn’s take of “Body And Soul” begs for a bare treatment. And while her version is well-executed, complex string and horn lines muddy its allure. Listeners’ interest should be piqued by Kuhn’s skill and potential, but the album could benefit from some crisp, open air.

—Alexa Peters

Sky Stories: Roses; Horizon; Queen For An Hour; Body And Soul; Fit; Catch Me; Beanstalk; Ponta De Areia; Anthem; Jet Trails And Shooting Stars. (62:22)

Personnel: Emily Kuhn, Joe Suikonen (2, 5, 9), trumpet; Mercedes Inez Martinez, vocals; Max Bessesen, alto saxophone, tenor saxophone, soprano saxophone; Ben Cruz (1, 6), guitar; Evan Levine, Katie Ernst (2, 5, 9), bass; Myra Hinrichs, Lucia Thomas, Erendira Izguerra, violin; Christine Fliginger, viola; Danny Hoppe, cello; Gustavo Cortinas, Nate Friedman (2, 5, 9), drums.

Ordering info: emilykuhntrumpet.bandcamp.com



Frank Woeste *Pocket Rhapsody II*

ACT 9917

★★★★

This intriguing album begins with “Clara,” a short piece for piano and trumpet, which sets a thoughtful mood. The second track, “Parlance,” begins with an interlocking motif—played on Rhodes, bass and drums—that retains the opening track’s reflective quality, but weaves it into a clocklike counterpoint. Bandleader Frank Woeste works effectively with minimal tools throughout this piece, alternating unaccompanied keyboard interludes and solo sections, the motif pumping an ostinato beneath a trombone solo. A choir, singing wordlessly, bathes the performance in a muted play of shade and light.

These two works forecast what follows. At times, the interplay of parts borders on being too busy, so that the contrasts with contributions from the choir are less nuanced, more dramatic. On “Mirage,” this impression intensifies with a slamming beat from Stéphane Galland, his open hi-hat between each beat suggesting an anachronistic disco groove. Elsewhere, Woeste lets the deep, reverberant treatment of his Rhodes nudge him toward smooth jazz. But it all can be broken down into two elements: a dexterity at fitting complementary rhythm parts together and a sensitivity to texture. *Pocket Rhapsody II* pulls beauty from shadow for all to hear.

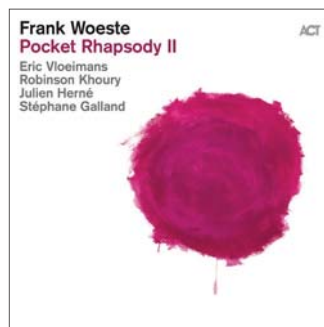
—Bob Doerschuk

Ordering info: actmusic.com

Pocket Rhapsody II: Clara; Parlance; Mirage; Wintersong; Bold; Tryptique I; Tryptique II; Tryptique III; Noire Et Blanche; Clair Obscur; Pocket Rhapsody. (47:06)

Personnel: Frank Woeste, keyboards; Eric Vloeimans, trumpet; Robinson Khoury, trombone; Julien Hérné, bass; Stéphane Galland, drums; Oscar Woeste (8), Children’s Choir Maîtrise des Hauts-de-Seine, vocals.

Ordering info: actmusic.com





TAMELA RYATT

Benjamin Boone

Internalizing Multiple Pulse Streams

I had the good fortune of living in Ghana during the 2017–18 academic year as a U.S. Fulbright Scholar, teaching at the University of Ghana and playing with some of the most amazing musicians on the planet. I performed with the Ghana Jazz Collective (Victor Dey Jr., Bernard Ayisa, Frank Kissi and Bright Osei), ultimately recording the album *Joy* (Origin Records) with them during my last days in Ghana.

I also played and studied with traditional masters such as xylophonist Aaron Bebe Sukura (with whom I co-founded The New Global Ensemble, along with Ghanaian percussionist Baffour Awuah Kyerematen and experimental German violinist Stefan Poetzsch). In addition, I had the opportunity to sit in with Ghanaian palm-wine, highlife, funk, pop and hip-hop groups.

I learned profound lessons about Ghanaian music. But, more importantly, I learned that these musical lessons translated into life-lessons: like how developing a multi-dimensional perspective of pulse teaches us about dealing with adversity; how including multiple skill levels in music-making creates a feeling of acceptance and a sense of value; and

how active and joyous participation in music or dance exemplifies how life is best lived.

POLYRHYTHMS

Two main features of Ghanaian music are polyrhythm and polyphony. The polyrhythms can be viewed as simultaneous meters flowing at different tempos. As UG professor John Collins explains, “Ghanaians maintain the main or steady pulse stream by the downward movement of their feet, supplying the critical anchoring component to the polyphonic flux. Over this, asymmetrical drum rhythms looking for rhythmic resolution provide the music with forward propulsion in the same way a tendency tone drives a harmony to a resolution.” On a deeper level, this main pulse represents life, which we must keep steady and on course, while other pulse streams represent life’s inevitable obstacles and tensions (like the pandemic). Collins notes this balancing of two dynamic but opposing forces, constantly intertwining and mirroring each other, is similar to the Chinese concepts of yin and yang.

Ghanaian musicians have internalized differing rates of movement, particularly the 3:2 and 3:4 ratios, to such a degree that they

can bounce between the streams, embellishing them in every way imaginable, often with isorhythms. Check out Jimi Durso’s great Woodshed article about isorhythms in last month’s *DownBeat* (“Pro Session,” January 2021), then try the following scaffolded exercises to internalize pulse dualities.

EXERCISES

Singer Theo Bleckmann once told me that to *really* know a rhythm, you have to internalize it in your body. Ghanaians do this in dance, simultaneously moving different parts of their body to different pulse streams. You, however, will do this by walking during the following exercises. The downward movement of your feet (the lowest line in the examples) will establish the main danced duple/quadruple pulse stream, over which you will speak the counts indicated while tapping your torso (upper notes). Then you can sing melodic fragments to the rhythm indicated.

- Say “1-2-3-4” with your feet, thinking of these as dotted quarter notes in 12/8. Over this, tap/count a stream of three notes against each two footsteps—a ubiquitous rhythm in Africa (see Example 1). Next, think of each footstep as a quarter note in 4/4 and the triple stream as quarter-note triplets as you count them as: “1-2-3-4-5-6” (Example 2). This focuses your attention on the triple stream until you can hear it as quarter notes in 6/4 (Example 3). Switch between this perception of six (your taps) as the main pulse and the perception that four (your feet) is the main pulse. You are training yourself to have two perspectives at once—like the multiple simultaneous perspectives in Picasso’s cubism portraits. Take some time to develop this auditory/mental/perceptual pivoting before continuing.

- Add a clear triple-meter phrase to the triple stream of Example 1, like “You make me feel like a natural woman” (Example 4), the “A” section of “My Favorite Things” (Example 5) or “Happy Birthday” (Example 6).

- Next, group two sets of quarter triplets into three units of two (2+2+2). Accent the first, third and fifth notes, counting 1-2, 1-2, 1-2, to create three measures of 2/4 in the time of one measure of 4/4 (Example 7). Sing two alternating notes in this rhythm, then a simple scale pattern (Example 8), then a symmetrical interval pattern (Example 9) and finally any altered chord pattern (Example 10).

- As Example 7 but with the second, fourth and sixth notes accented (Example 11).

- As Example 7 with no tap on 2, 4 or 6, suggesting one measure of 3 over one measure of 4/4 (Example 12).

- Use an eighth-note triplet over each footstep, accenting every other note, like Example 2 with subdivisions (Example 13).
- As Example 7 and Example 11, but divide the accented quarter notes into two eighth notes, emphasizing three groups of 2/4 over four footsteps (Examples 14 and 15).
- Group the 12 quarter notes from four quarter-note triplet groups (over eight footsteps) into three units of four (4+4+4), accenting the first of each grouping of four: 1-2-3, 1-2-3, 1-2-3, 1-2-3 (counting it 1-2-3-4, 1-2-3-4, 1-2-3-4). This implies three measures of 4/4 in the time of two measures of 4/4, creating two simultaneous rates of 4/4 (Example 16).
- Now it's time to really have fun. Sing tunes that clearly articulate quadruple meter into the quarter-triplet pulse stream (the faster 4/4 stream). Try "Cherokee" (Example 17) and "Giant Steps" (Example 18), then "Tenor Madness" and "Anthropology."
- Try the exercises above with your hands only, switching which one is substituting for your feet.
- Play the exercises with your instrument. Use Drumgenius, a metronome or foot pats. Many of master xylophonist Aaron Bebe Sukura's accompaniment patterns are derivatives of the polyrhythms above (and used as isorhythms).
- Now embellish or invert any of these rhythms. For example, saxophonist Bernard Ayisa practices groups of four over measures of 3/4 (an inversion of Example 12) using this lick (Example 19).

AGBADZA

The first Ghanaian rhythm usually taught is the gankogui (agogo) part from the Ewe Agbadza dance, known as the "basic rhythm" (Example 20). As it turns out, the primary meter isn't 6/4 (or 3/4); it's in compound meter: 12/8 or 6/8 (Example 21). Switch between hearing it (and improvising over it) in 6/4, then 12/8.

To mimic the shaker part, put one of your hands, palm down, 6 inches above one of your thighs. Put your other hand under it. The lower hand either pats your thigh on the low notes ("pa") or comes up, hitting the palm of the other hand on the high notes ("ti"). Switch between hearing this in 12/8 (Example 22) and 6/4 (Example 23). Notice the "pa" is like Example 21, while the second half of "ti" generates the 3:2 of Example 1. Try placing the shaker rhythm against three (Example 24). Countless other rhythms appear with the "basic rhythm." A few are shown in Example 25. Drummer Frank Kissi approximates the Agbadza on drum set by playing the gankogui part on cymbals, the foot stomps on bass drums and rim shots with all but the second bass drum hit.

We've only just begun to scratch the surface, but I hope you can feel dual pulse streams in your body better than before. For a deeper dive, search "Royal Hartigan" for transcriptions of Ghanaian rhythms for drum set; YouTube videos by Ghanaian CK Ladzekpo; "John Collins Ghana" or "J.H. Kwabena Nketia" for ethnomusicological/historic writings; George Howlett's "West African Grooves" in *Guitar World* magazine; and "Agbadza Dance" to see polyrhythms in the body.

DB

Ex. 1 count or Ex. 2 1 2 3 4 5 6 Ex. 3

Ex. 4 Ex. 5 3 3 3 3 etc.

Ex. 6 3 3 3 3 etc.

Ex. 7 2/4 2/4 2/4 Ex. 8 3 3 3 3 Am7 etc.

Ex. 9 3 3 3 3 G7alt etc.

Ex. 11 3 3 Ex. 12 3 or 1 2 3

Ex. 13 1 3 2 3

Ex. 14 2/4 2/4 2/4 or 12/8

Ex. 15 3 3 or 12/8

Ex. 16 4/4 4/4 4/4 Ex. 17 4/4 4/4 4/4 etc.

Ex. 18 4/4 4/4 4/4 etc. Ex. 19 4:3 or 4:3

(Ex. 19 cont.'d) Am7 4:3 4:3 4:3 4:3

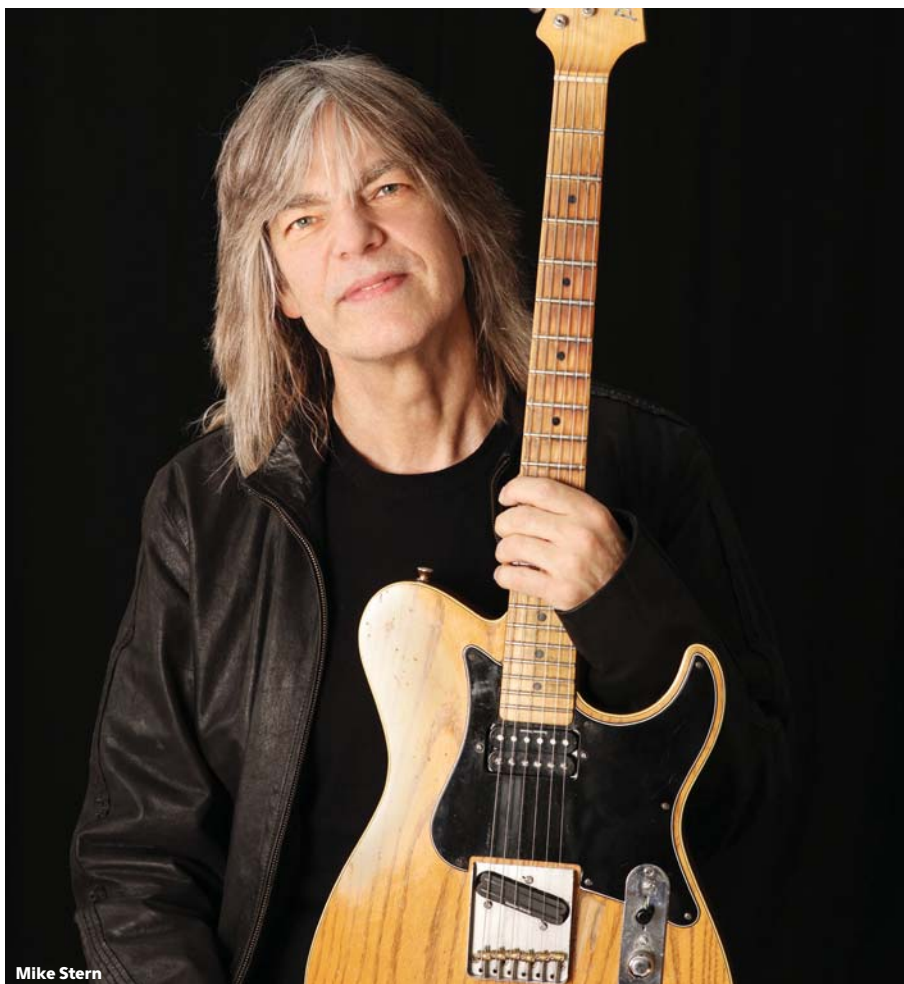
Ex. 20 Ex. 21 Ex. 22 pa pa ti pa pa ti pa ti pa

Ex. 23 pa pa ti pa pa ti pa ti pa Ex. 24 Ex. 25

(Ex. 25 cont.'d)

(Ex. 25 cont.'d)

Saxophonist, composer and educator Benjamin Boone's album with The Ghana Jazz Collective, *Joy (Origin)*, was released last March. His most recent album, *The Poets Are Gathering* (with Kenny Werner, Ari Hoenig, Ben Monder, Corcoran Holt and others), was released in October on Origin Records. Boone is a professor at California State University, Fresno. Visit benjaminboone.com to hear live performances with The Ghana Jazz Collective, watch studio videos of The New Global Ensemble or see studio videos from recording sessions for *The Poets Are Gathering*.



Mike Stern

Mike Stern's Guitar Solo on 'Upside Downside'

Back in the mid-1980s, my guitar teacher kept me late after a lesson to play for me the first track from guitarist Mike Stern's debut album, *Upside Downside* (Atlantic, 1986). I was enthralled. On the way home I stopped at a record store and bought a copy. I listened to the title track a few times before being able to move on to the rest of the album.

The energy Stern produced in that solo was stunning. I found it inspiring the way he blended blues and rock 'n' roll attitude and tone—and guitar techniques such as string bending, vibrato and pinch harmonics—with jazz sophistication.

From his first note—a note so high it's toward the top of his available range, a note that Stern milks for more than seven mea-

sures, bending it from A to C through the B and B_b, in between—he's making a statement. A common musical compliment is to speak figuratively of how much a musician can do

with one note, but here Stern is quite literally showing what he's capable of. Between his bending the note through a minor third's worth of pitches, oftentimes playing "in the cracks" between the notes, along with the vibrato, especially the wide one in measure 5, Stern speaks volumes with this note.

In this solo, Stern combines multiple genres in a near-seamless manner, as if these disparate styles are not separate in his ear. We hear old-school blues licks in bars 8–9 and 30–32; bits of bebop-style chromaticism in the tail end of bar 23, as well as bars 33 and 36, and the diminished arpeggio on the second beat of 35; and lots of strings of modal rock 'n' roll.

There's plenty of jazz within Stern's rock 'n' roll. Most of this improvisation occurs over an E dominant harmony, but the extensions are somewhat undefined. (The bass line, for instance, contains both the sixth and flat sixth.) Stern's scalar runs over this are minor, relating to that rock/blues sound of playing minor over dominant chords, but he varies the mode indiscriminately.

Examine bars 16–19: Stern starts out in aeolian mode, but for the ascending run in bar 17 he switches to phrygian mode (playing F natural, the lowered second, instead of F#), but then he descends through aeolian in the next measure. This is followed up with melodic minor and then back to aeolian. This creates some chromaticism, but in a manner that sounds somewhere between jazz and rock.

Bars 32 and 33 take this concept further. Starting out with some standard blues-rock vocabulary, Stern adds in the sixth, making it more modal, and then goes full-out bebop with chromatic passing tones, keeping the frenetic rock 'n' roll energy alive. Not only does this blur the distinction between genres, but also wonderfully sets up the approaching chord changes, and the jazz-leaning arpeggios, scales and four-note groups Stern plays there.

The only other times there have been chord changes were measures 10–15 and 27–29: descending triads over a pedal tone. In both cases Stern not only decides to play very inside the changes, but also does some motivic development.

The first time Stern plays a very folk-rock guitar idea—sixths (in this case the fifth and third of the chord)—and descends chromatically along with the harmonies. The fifth is bent up to the sixth and back again (except on the D_b, where he bends to the flat sixth) but is played rhythmically different every time.

In the second instance his opening motif takes up two bars, starting with a sixth chord arpeggio (or major pentatonic runs, if we include the second he uses to slide to the third) that crosses two octaves, but ends on a minor-third bend and release. This is clever as the bend brings it to the major third, but the release lands on the third of the following chord.

This marriage of jazz and rock works so well, Stern repeats it near-verbatim for the next two bars. But since it starts a beat earlier, the release turns into a blues lick that Stern resolves into the third of the D/E chord. The deftness with which Stern fuses various idioms makes “fusion” an appropriate term for this music.

Twice is enough for this idea, apparently, for in the next measure Stern plays a descending D_b major scale (a perfect fit for the D_b chord, though curious that he didn’t attempt to incorporate the E natural from the bass pedal), which in the next bar turns into C lydian, which is the same as E aeolian. This makes a nice transition back to the E7 part of the improvisation, and changing scales to match the underlying harmonies brings us closer to jazz.

There’s also a wonderful touch of how Stern emphasizes the F# at the beginning of bar 29, countered with an upper line that resolves to B natural. This doesn’t sound like C major, even though the notes don’t conflict with it. This also strengthens the shift to E.

And let’s not neglect to mention Stern’s fluency with syncopated rhythms and how he uses quarter notes, eighths, triplets, 16ths, 16th-note triplets and even 32nds. When he introduces strings of 16th notes at bar 17, it sounds fast; but the masses of 32nds from the end of bar 19 through 23, and in bar 33 (including the 16th-note triplets in the previous measure), make the 16ths in the following bars (starting at measures 24 and 34) seem relaxed. It’s all a matter of perspective, and Stern manipulates that perspective expertly.

DB

Jimi Durso is a guitarist and bassist based in the New York area. Visit him online at jimidurso.com

Bonamassa Black Beauty Les Paul Custom Collectible Axe at an Affordable Price from Epiphone

Joe Bonamassa is a highly regarded blues-rock guitarist who also happens to be an avid collector of vintage guitars. Ten years ago, Bonamassa joined forces with Epiphone to produce a series of recreations from Bonamassa's extensive private stable of instruments. This partnership between artist and luthier has spawned eight signature guitar models, the most recent of which is the Joe Bonamassa Black Beauty Les Paul Custom in ebony finish. It's a faithful replica of Bonamassa's most prized axe, a black 1958 Gibson Les Paul Custom, also known as the "Black Beauty."

Among all the guitars that Epiphone and Bonamassa have recreated, the Black Beauty is probably the rarest of the bunch. It was only manufactured between 1957 and 1961, and an original will set you back more than \$80,000. Epiphone worked closely with Bonamassa for two years creating the model to ensure that the guitar looked, played and sounded like the original, while also remaining surprisingly affordable at only \$799.

My first impression of this guitar was that it is extremely well built. Naturally, being a Les Paul solidbody with a triple pickup configuration, it weighs in at nearly 9 pounds. The workmanship is far better than other guitars I have seen at this price, and it even comes in a heavy-duty fitted hardshell case. All of the hardware on the guitar is gold-plated, and I appreciate that Epiphone did not do any relicing except for the yellowing of the body and neck binding.

Everything is faithful to Bonamassa's original Black Beauty, right down to the Epiphone closed-back tuners, which mainly were used on Epiphone archtops in the '40s and '50s, but Gibson probably had some lying around

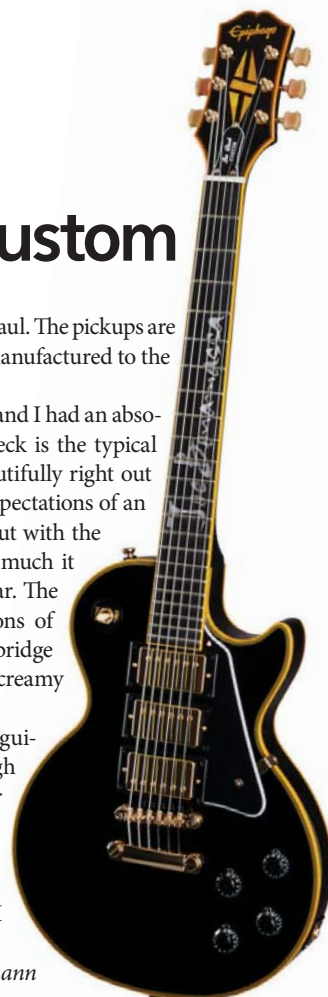
back then and put them on this Les Paul. The pickups are Epiphone ProBucker humbuckers manufactured to the same specs as the originals.

Playing this guitar is a pleasure, and I had an absolute blast with it. The mahogany neck is the typical '50s hefty profile, and it played beautifully right out of the box. Generally, I adjust my expectations of an instrument based on its price tag, but with the Bonamassa, I was amazed by how much it did not feel like a \$799 import guitar. The pickups are nice and clear with tons of gain, and switching between neck, bridge and middle, the guitar can go from creamy and thick to biting and gritty.

Bonamassa calls it a "workhorse guitar," and I completely agree. Although this might not be the first choice for the jazz purist, the Epiphone Joe Bonamassa Black Beauty Les Paul Custom is definitely one of the best values in a vintage-style guitar that I have seen in a long time.

—Keith Baumann

epiphone.com



Sabian HHX Complex Series Exotic, Dark Sounds Paired with Excellent Stick Definition

Fresh off the lathe from Sabian is the HHX Complex line of cymbals, introduced in 2020 and steadily gaining traction heading into 2021.

Expanding on successful models in the company's Hand Hammered family, the HHX Complex series combines shimmering, dark sound characteristics with excellent stick definition. They're offered in thin and medium crashes, thin and medium rides, and medium hats. For this review, Sabian sent a variety of different cymbals, which was great for getting a clear impression of sonic characteristics throughout the HHX Complex family.

The HHX Complex cymbals feature generous hammering on the top and bottom. The bell is also heavily hammered and is unlathed (raw). The lathing pattern is tight, and the thin weight and hammering results in tonally complex sounds.

My favorite of the bunch was the 21-inch Complex Thin Ride. It opens up and speaks immediately. The beautifully dark, almost trashy wash never builds up too much and is very controllable. Stick definition comes through with a sweetness that balances out the shimmering darkness. The bell is dark, but very controlled and cutting if

you need it be. The 22-inch Complex Medium ride has similar characteristics, however its heavier weight puts the emphasis more on controlling the wash and improving stick definition, making it slightly less "crashable."

The HHX Complex crashes blew me away. They share sonic attributes with the rides, but they're unique in the ways they accomplish it. The crash sound is explosive. It barks with authority and gets out of the way quickly. The 16-inch Complex Thin Crash erupts with a dark trashiness that most cymbals this size don't dare try. The 18- and 19-inch crashes have a full-bodied crash, good stick definition and a playable bell, making them excellent all-around cymbals.

The 15- and 14-inch Complex Hats are both of medium weight. They have a beautiful splashiness with enough body to give them some volume and heft. Stick definition is excellent on both. Intricate stick and shoulder patterns are a breeze, and the foot "chip" is very clean and cutting.

If you like thin, dark-sounding cymbals but miss the clarity often associated with them, you're in luck, as Sabian clearly has figured out how to combine those qualities in the HHX Complex line. —Ryan Bennett

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Guitarist Nir Felder (left), a faculty member at The New School, delivers online instruction to student Evan Macaluso.

COURTESY NIR FELDER

The New School Embraces Remote Learning

FOR JAZZ STUDENTS ENROLLED IN FALL classes at The New School in New York City, the “new normal” during the pandemic meant that all instructional activity took place online.

To help students get the maximum benefit from their classes, administrators realized that the first step was to ensure that everyone had the proper equipment.

“The New School recognized that not every student was going to have the hardware, software or internet connection that they might need to succeed,” Keller Coker, dean of the institution’s School of Jazz and Contemporary Music, said via Zoom in November. “Every single registered student—part-time or full-time—was given a technology grant on the first day of school. It was \$500 to cover a USB microphone, a piece of software, a better internet connection, whatever they needed. It was \$500 transferred directly to their account.

“Students had their syllabi beforehand, and the faculty made sure to identify [the equipment required for each course]. Because of that communication, all students essentially had what they needed by the end of the first week.”

This past fall, guitarist Nir Felder and saxophonist Jane Ira Bloom both taught five-week courses called Recording Combo Modules. Felder has helped student musicians learn skills that they can apply to real-world situations following graduation.

“The New School has provided a brows-

er-based platform called Soundtrap, which students can record with, which is great,” Felder said via videoconference. “But a lot of my students are more advanced, and they want to learn [additional] real-world applications, like Pro Tools, Logic and Ableton. We’ve been mainly working in Pro Tools, and students are so excited to learn about how to better record themselves.

“I open up Pro Tools on my computer and I share my screen. I can show them directly how to edit something, how to use a plug-in and how change different sounds. It’s really helpful for them to see it on *their* screen. If they have a question, I can show them how to do it right away, instead of them, you know, watching a 20-minute YouTube tutorial to find the one thing that they can’t figure out. So, [the class] is very hands-on.”

Coker is a firm believer that in addition to learning musical chops, students should gain technological skills, too: “We had forums with students and faculty, and I asked our faculty members, ‘How much of your living do you make doing the kind of thing we’re about to do during this pandemic?’ And several of them said, ‘Oh, that is how I make the majority of my money. I make it online, doing online lessons, [recording] single tracks, and doing networked recording.’”

Bloom explained that she wants students to embrace the technology that allows them to

layer individual instrumental parts into an ensemble recording; however, she also encourages them to not lose sight of the unpredictable, improvisational aspects of making music.

“A lot of times, students are so caught up in the technology of the recording—the oddness of living in a set of headphones—that when we revisit their compositions, [our goal is to figure out] how to get the *humanity* back in the tracks,” she said. “We [discuss] how to push air molecules through a microphone, how to expand your emotional range in a new recorded world, so that the microphone picks up what you *mean*. Students are thinking about things like that. And sometimes, they even put asymmetry back into their [recording], so that it feels human again, as opposed to metric.”

Among the other world-class jazz artists on the faculty are drummer Matt Wilson and trumpeter Dave Douglas. Both musicians helped their students to record, mix and master an entire album during a five-week course.

“It’s incredibly meaningful, the connection between mentors and students right now,” Bloom said. “There’s a heightened sense of commitment and responsibility, because we need our music, and we need to talk about it, and we need to make it together. Our imagination and creativity are so important to the students right now. You just want to give it your all, because you can sense the need is there.”

—Bobby Reed

Rez Abbasi

By the time he topped the category Rising Star–Guitar in the 2013 DownBeat Critics Poll, Rez Abbasi already had released several critically acclaimed albums. He has maintained a busy schedule in recent years, composing a score for a 1929 silent film (documented on the 2019 Whirlwind album *A Throw Of Dice*) and collaborating with harpist Isabelle Olivier on *Oasis* (Enja).

Abbasi's latest project is the trio album *Django Shift* (Whirlwind), a salute to the music of Django Reinhardt featuring acoustic guitars, organ, synthesizers and drums. For his first Blindfold Test, Abbasi commented on the music via videoconference from his home in Harlem.

Thumbscrew

"Cheap Knock Off" (*Thumbscrew*, Cuneiform, 2014) Mary Halvorson, guitar; Michael Formanek, bass; Thomas Fujiwara, drums.

Is it Mary Halvorson? I don't really know her music that well, but on the couple of records I have heard, I feel that she combines the cerebral and the heartfelt, and sincerity—all those elements—very well.

I like her playing, with all the various intervals. I think guitar players sometimes get too much into scales, and she's definitely not one of them [laughs]. I appreciate her somewhat unconventional way of approaching music, in general.

Will Vinson/Gilad Hekselman/Antonio Sánchez

"Upside" (*Trio Grande*, Whirlwind, 2020) Vinson, alto saxophone, keyboards; Hekselman, guitar; Sánchez, drums.

I love the drum sound on this. The guitarist is sort of in between a Pat Metheny and a Kurt Rosenwinkel sound, which is always a nice sound. A lot of reverb. I really appreciate the space they're using between the phrases. On a tune like this, it's so easy to play eighth notes all day long.

I'll take a wild guess and say maybe Matt Stevens? Or Gilad? It's definitely from that generation that's inspired by Rosenwinkel, but they're all finding their own way, of course. It's not the new record with Will Vinson and Antonio Sánchez? Well, that's strange, because I heard a fourth member. That's why I didn't guess that group [right away], because it sounded like a quartet, with a keyboard or something.

Jeff Parker

"Go Away" (*Suite For Max Brown*, International Anthem/Nonesuch, 2020) Parker, guitar, vocals, sampler; Paul Bryan, bass, vocals; Makaya McCraven, drums.

Love the groove. I used to listen to a lot of West African music ... and it kind of reminds me of that. A little King Crimson in there.

Is it Jeff Parker? From what very little I've heard of him, his records of late are very groove-oriented, first of all, and they harken a little bit back to the '70s and '80s, but very modern. And I can tell his playing because he actually plays bebop lines over all this stuff. He's articulating funk with bebop, and it's kind of unique in that sense, and I like that. It's a bit of a jam-band vibe.

Alexander Noice

"Breathe In The Ether" (*NOICE*, Orenda, 2019) Noice, guitar; Karina Kallas, Argenta Walther, vocals; Gavin Templeton, alto saxophone; Colin Burgess, electric bass; Andrew Lessman, drums, percussion, Roland SPDSX.

Sounds like early David Bowie meets Thelonious Monk. I wouldn't consider this jazz, but I guess that's beside the point. Sounds more like progressive rock, or progressive pop. Great energy. I love the rhythmical bounce. Very loopy. It's an interesting composition. It's in your face, constantly, so you have to be somewhat acceptant of that. ... [The guitarist's]



vocabulary reminds me a little bit of Mike Stern, that sort of repetitive, chromatic approach-note kind of thing.

Miles Okazaki

"The Lighthouse" (*Trickster's Dream*, Pi, 2020) Okazaki, guitar; Matt Michell, piano; Anthony Tidd, electric bass; Sean Rickman, drums.

Sounds like they're influenced by Rush. This is a little bit of a guess, but is it Miles Okazaki? He's a great writer and conceptualist. If it wasn't for his playing, I could tell it was him by the fact that the tune is so heavily rhythmically based. He's really a musicologist when it comes to digging deep into rhythm. The only reason why I wouldn't have thought it was Miles is because usually he doesn't use electronics.

He's one of these guys who harkens back to a period that's before all these people started to employ guitar pedals and all that. I've always seen him as someone who's reaching for something that is *in* the guitar itself.

David Roitstein/Larry Koonse

"Mamulengo" (*Conversations*, Jazz Compass, 2015) Roitstein, piano; Koonse, guitar.

I love that piano intro. Really beautiful composition, they put a lot of thought into that. Kind of influenced by Egberto Gismonti and Ralph Towner. Very Metheny-ish composition there, for the solo—or Lyle Mays, not sure which one. You pretty much stumped me on this one.

I was so taken by the composition that it sort of overshadowed the improvisations. [after] I'm a huge Larry Koonse fan. When I was a freshman at USC, he was just graduating [from the university]. Larry just blew my mind. He sounds so great. It's so relaxed, the way he plays. He pushes out of the bounds pretty organically, and then steps back in. He's utterly musical, and it's pleasing to hear him on acoustic guitar. Larry's a perfect example of why I'm happy I spent my younger life in Los Angeles.

John Abercrombie

"Ralph's Piano Waltz" (*Current Events*, ECM, 1986) Abercrombie, guitar; Marc Johnson, bass; Peter Erskine, drums.

I haven't heard these records for a while, but I was certainly influenced by John. I took a few lessons from him when I was 22, when I first moved to New York. He was such a beautiful soul. I remember in the lesson he would always say, "Play in a melodically relaxed fashion." At the time, I really didn't know what he meant—I *kind of* did, but as I evolved, I realized what he meant: Let things happen, don't be so on top of things all the time. His compositions are often so simple, but they speak volumes, and that's similar to his playing. John has been an influence on a lot of people. We're gonna all miss him.

DB

The "Blindfold Test" is a listening test that challenges the featured artist to discuss and identify the music and musicians who performed on selected recordings. The artist is then asked to rate each tune using a 5-star system. No information is given to the artist prior to the test.

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