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Jazz, Blues & Beyond

JON BATISTE

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On the surface of things, it seems counterintuitive that DownBeat critics would name the same musician both Jazz Artist of the Year and Beyond Artist of the Year, until you learn that the musician in question is Jon Batiste, and suddenly the double billing makes sense.

“She was, like Betty Carter, a musician’s musician,” Ora Harris said of Hall of Fame entrant Geri Allen. Harris managed both.
Beyond Making History

THE TAGLINE “JAZZ, BLUES & BEYOND” first appeared on the cover of DownBeat magazine in April 1990. It was born because improvised music and artists were going in so many directions, and we didn’t want to be bound by the constraints of genre. But categorizing is human nature, isn’t it? So, the question became how to make sense of it and offer the broadest, most beautiful road ahead.

Jazz will always be at the core of this magazine, its birthright; blues, that’s its roots; and beyond represents music and artists that are, frankly, “beyond category,” as the great Duke Ellington was fond of saying.

“I think what people hear in music is either agreeable to the ear or not,” Ellington once said in an interview. “And if this is so, if music is agreeable to my ear, why does it have to have a category?”

Exactly. But it’s certainly a concept with which artists, music lovers and even humble music journalists have struggled.

The “Beyond” categories first appeared in the 41st Annual DownBeat Critics Poll in 1993. Our first Beyond Artist of the Year? Tom Waits, a pop artist who certainly had one foot in the jazz world. The first Beyond Album of the Year? Mario Bauza’s *Tanga* (Messidor). Bauza, of course, was a founding father of Cuban jazz.

And ever since, the great Beyond has added significant color, depth and flair to DownBeat’s Critics and Readers polls as well as our news, reviews and features sections.

This year, we have some Jazz, Blues & Beyond history to report. For the first time ever in a DownBeat poll, an artist has been named both the Jazz Artist of the Year and the Beyond Artist of the Year. As journalist Suzanne Lorge so aptly points out beginning on page 20, it seems almost inconceivable, until you find out the artist is pianist, vocalist, composer, TV bandleader and Grammy-winner Jon Batiste.

Batiste has the heart of a jazz musician. Back in 2018, his solo piano concert at the Newport Jazz Festival was one of the best performances this writer has ever seen. Armed with a full command of his instrument, Batiste displayed that his vast vocabulary of jazz ... and beyond ... was firmly at his fingertips. One of the true treats of that show was seeing how Batiste had seated dozens of Jazz House Kids Summer Workshop students behind him on stage so they could watch him work up close.

Batiste’s 2021 recording *We Are*, which our critics have voted Beyond Album of the Year, certainly isn’t jazz, but it’s jazz-influenced. How could it not be? That’s why he is the Jazz and Beyond Artist of the Year.

And if you want a clue as to why Batiste casts such a wide stylistic net, the answer is in his hit song “Freedom.” After all, that’s what jazz has always been about.

EDITOR’S NOTE: In a failed experiment, we tried to expand the Veterans Committee, which selects overlooked-but-deserving artists to the DownBeat Hall of Fame. Unfortunately, none received the requisite two-thirds majority for entry this year. Les Paul and Paul Gonzalves each received more than 50% of the vote. DownBeat regrets that we couldn’t get at least one in. We’ll revamp and try again next year. DB
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In Praise of Jones
Thank you for another excellent issue [DB July], this time cover to cover. I thoroughly enjoyed reading Frank Alkyer’s cover interview with Sean Jones. Sean is a great storyteller, very funny and has reached all the goals he told his mother [he would] when a child. I laughed out loud when reading the Wynton Marsalis telephone call story. I have seen Sean performing at the Jazz Showcase for quite a few years, and he is one of my favorite trumpet players. His record Live From Jazz At The Bistro is one of my favorite Jazz trumpet records.

Big Thanks for Erwin
Thank you for Howard Mandel’s excellent and very informative article on Erwin Helfer [July]. I regretfully admit that I wasn’t familiar with him, though there were so many familiar names of musicians in the piece that strongly rang out to me that the more I read, the more I wanted to know about and hear Helfer. Perhaps the first artist that caught my attention was Otis Span, one of my favorite blues pianists. My interest was further aroused when I learned that Helfer lived for a time in New Orleans, my hometown, and that while in the Crescent City he met Baby Dodds, who became an early pioneer of the drum set. Little did I imagine that the names of faves like trumpeter Lester Bowie and saxophonist Roscoe Mitchell would also turn up.

Jazz Master Suggestion
When is Louis Hayes going to be an NEA Jazz Master? He has played with just about everyone, been a member of bands with Oscar Peterson, Cannonball Adderley and Horace Silver, and is older than all the new inductees.

Perpetual Goodness
Thanks to Bill Milkowski for his review [DB June] of Perpetual Pendulum by Goldings Bernstein Stewart. Also an extra special thank you to Bill Stewart for his composition “FU Donald,” dedicated to the former president. Love the four-note phrase repeated in the head. That tune by itself is enough for me to buy the CD.

Ticket Prices, Ouch!
As a music lover living on the mid-peninsula in the Bay Area, I was happy to hear that Menlo Park’s Guild Theatre, formerly an art movie house, would reopen as a live music venue. As a jazz fan, I was intrigued by the Guild’s posting on Facebook announcing that tenor saxophonist Kamasi Washington would be performing at the theatre in July. My happy anticipation quickly changed to disappointment when I saw that tickets were over $140 each! This is about twice as expensive as the same gig would be at the SFJAZZ Center.

Editor’s Note: Bob, expensive? Yes. Worth it? In Kamasi’s case, more than worth it. At DownBeat, we are proponents of the artists. Our artists need to be paid.

Corrections & Clarifications
The following errors from the July 2022 issue have been corrected in DownBeat’s digital edition:

- Peter Margasak’s insightful words about Polish pianist Marta Warelis in our “New Sounds From Europe” feature were incorrectly attributed to another writer.
- Our review of the Sadowsky Frank Vignola Archtop mistakenly indicated that the late jazz guitar legend Jim Hall was present at one of Vignola’s recent Guitar Nights. DownBeat regrets the errors.
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While Manhattan was in the throes of the COVID-19 shutdown during 2020, renowned photographer, recording engineer, label head and lifelong jazz advocate Jimmy Katz, with his wife and artistic partner, Dena, got an inspired notion for bringing live music back to the people again: “There were a lot of organizations that were doing streaming at the time, but I really felt that jazz is a live art form. So I wanted to still have live concerts but do them in a safe way.”

That led to the creation of a free concert series in Central Park, which Katz dubbed “Walk With the Wind” in honor of the late U.S. representative and civil rights leader John Lewis, whose powerful 1998 autobiography was titled *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement*.

The series, which provided much-needed economic, social and creative opportunities for musicians during a literal shutdown of live music, kicked off on Aug. 28, 2020, with a free, open-air concert by tenor saxophonist Wayne Escoffery leading a trio of bassist Ugonna Okegwo and drummer Mark Whitfield Jr. on the Central Park Mall. It was only fitting that Escoffery inaugurate the series, since it was he who gave Katz the idea.

“That summer, I left the Highbridge section of the Bronx and rented a sublet in a high-rise on the Upper West Side near Central Park,” the tenor man recalled via Facebook. “I made a post about the move and asked if anyone was in the neighborhood who wanted to play. Bassist Joshua Levine reached out and invited me to play with him and his crew of musicians at Ladies Pavilion in Central Park. At that time, many of the younger guys on the scene were busking in the park to keep their chops up, so I figured, ‘Why not join them?’ And the first time I did it, I ran into Jimmy Katz there. He and I had a nice talk, and shortly thereafter, he called and ran the idea by me about sponsoring real well-paid performances in the park. I thought it was a great idea, and I did the very first one and a few after that.”

The series continued through the fall with a who’s who on the current New York jazz scene, from the Marquis Hill Quartet and the Michael Thomas Trio to the Eric McPherson Trio and the Leap Day Trio with Matt Wilson, Mimi Jones and Jeff Lederer. Crowds ranged from 50 to 300 people for these regular weekend afternoon performances on The Mall by such as Joel Ross, Nasheet Waits, Mark Turner, Immanuel Wilkins, Melissa Aldana and Nicole Glover. Chris Potter closed out the fall series that year when the weather started getting too cold to play in the park.

When the series resumed in the spring of 2021, Katz relocated to a new location on the west side of the park, in an area historically known as Seneca Village. The first free Black settlement in New York City, it was founded in 1825 and thrived until the mid-1850s when the city took it over to build Central Park.
Park, which opened in 1858. “The Mall had gotten kind of crowded with buskers playing ‘Stairway To Heaven’ while one of our artists was trying to play a ballad,” Katz explained. “So I wanted to move it, anyway, and I thought Seneca Village was really the perfect place to continue the series. What really impressed me was how much these events meant to all the people who showed up. People told me that they organized their whole week around coming out to the park and hearing these concerts, and the musicians were so excited to play in front of other human beings. The vibe was so great.”

There was no summer edition of “Walk With the Wind.” As Katz explained, “The whole time we were doing concerts, I was concerned that the Parks Department or the police were going to shut us down. Finally, I contacted them in July of 2021 and explained that I had already done 35 concerts, and they promptly said, ‘You can’t do any of those things out in the park.’ So we shifted locations to Hunter College, where we did a series of free concerts in the winter of 2021 called ‘Meditations on Freedom,’ curated by Nasheet Waits.”

Giant Step Arts plans to continue its free indoor series this summer at Hunter College. “I have to say, I’m not unhappy that we’re moving inside because it’s really challenging and very stressful recording outside,” said Katz. “Wind is really the biggest issue, of course, when you record outside. So I had wind-screens on everything. And I was concerned about my microphones and recording equipment getting rained on and damaged because we were totally exposed to the elements out there. There was no concert stage or anything like that. But in retrospect, the musicians and I really liked having all of those external noises because it gives you a sense you’re outside in Central Park.”

Those ambient sounds can be faintly heard on two new album releases from Giant Step Arts: one by the Burton McPherson Trio with bassist Dezron Douglas and another by trumpeter Jason Palmer with tenor saxophonist Mark Turner, bassist Edward Perez and drummer Johnathan Blake. Both were recorded live in the park at Summit Rock. And like all Giant Step Arts releases, the musicians have total control of their artistic projects. They receive a complete run of 700 CDs and digital downloads of their music. They also retain complete ownership of their masters. Giant Step Arts also provides promo photos, videos and PR. It’s an unprecedented formula.

“My mission is to put as much money into the hands of musicians as possible from what I raise,” Katz said. “So one of the things that made this Central Park concert series so wonderful is that all the money I raised went right to the musicians. And then on top of it, musicians got donations from audience members who came out and gave donations afterwards and bought CDs. It was a really nice, loose hang for people. It was designed kind of like a block party, except you had Chris Potter and Mark Turner and Nasheet Waits playing.”

Upcoming recording projects for Katz and Giant Step Arts include Mark Turner’s first live recording as a leader (at the Village Vanguard with trumpeter Jason Palmer, bassist Joe Martin and drummer Jonathan Pinson), a new Tarbaby recording with Nasheet Waits, Orrin Evans and Eric Revis, and an all-star band featuring Waits, Turner, vibraphonist Steve Nelson and bassist Rahsaan Carter.

Katz’s catalog for Giant Step Arts, a label he founded in 2018, has maintained the distinctive visual signature of the cover photography he and his wife Dena create.

“My visual cues really come from the sound of specific saxophone players, whether it’s the way Joe Lovano sounds or Pharoah Sanders sounds,” he said. “I’m trying to have a real ‘sound’ as a photographer, and I use them as my guiding light on how to do that. You know, Jackie McLean does not sound like Paul Desmond or like Lee Konitz. Each one of these artists has a really strong sound, and that’s what I’ve always worked on: having a real visual signature.”

—Bill Milkowski
Landrus Dedicates CD to Endangered Species

BRIAN LANDRUS CAN REMEMBER THE exact moment he stopped eating animals. It was during lunch in the sixth grade, and after grabbing a hamburger from the cafeteria, he took out from his bag a pamphlet from PETA that his parents had left around the house. Having already sworn off pork due to a childhood affection for pigs (despite his love for the taste of bacon), the rather graphic photos on that pamphlet of what truly went on inside slaughterhouses further confirmed his empathy for all living creatures. “I said to my friends, I’m never going to eat meat again,” Landrus remembered, speaking over video from his Brooklyn home. “They all laughed, and I laughed, too, but something just clicked, and I never did again.”

Landrus is known for his exceptional low-woodwind playing — he’s been a mainstay in the DownBeat Critics Poll since 2015 on baritone saxophone and bass clarinet — and for composing and arranging. He will enter the fall as a full-time professor of jazz composition at Berklee College of Music. Yet he has felt a calling to do something that was, in his words, “more important than blowing air through a tube.”

He doesn’t regret going into music, but Landrus once considered becoming a veterinarian, or even environmental activism. “I’m not sure how [that] would have gone, because I probably would have been aggressive,” he said, cryptically.

In a discussion with a representative for Save the Elephants, a U.K.-registered charity based in Kenya, he learned more about the war between illegal poachers and activists, dubbed “hunter-hunters” for their extreme, sometimes violent tactics. He explained soberly, “I don’t think I would be around, is what I’m trying to say. I think I would have gone out in a blaze of fire …”

Refocusing his conflamng ardor to music was perhaps a better career choice. For his 11th album, Landus pairs his proclivity for music with his love of animals, resulting in The Red List (Palmetto), a collection of 15 original pieces dedicated to the most endangered animals on Earth.

The Red List was established in 1964 by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), a regularly updated accounting for an ever-increasing number of endangered animal, plant and fungus species.

To date, more than 142,000 species are on the Red List, with 40,000 of those brought to the brink of extinction. “I was blown away by the number of animals that have gone extinct, and the amount of creatures going extinct, that are on the verge, that I had never even heard of,” Landrus lamented. He mentioned the plight of the Vaquita, the world’s smallest porpoise; its population currently stands at eight. “The more I learned,” he said, “the more passion I had in doing something to bring awareness.”

Landrus reached out to many environmental organizations before finding a partner in Save the Elephants. He started an online campaign to finance the project, donating 20% of the proceeds and 100% of any profits to the organization.

He then put his band together, drawing upon long-time collaborators such as guitarist Nir Felder, bassist Lonnie Plaxico and drummer Rudy Royston. He added some other friends, old and new, to the mix: trombonist Ryan Keberle, saxophonists Ron Blake and Jaleel Shaw, trumpeter Steve Roach, vocalist Corey King, keyboardist Geoffrey Keezer and percussionist John Hadfield. Landrus waited until both the band and the studio dates were confirmed before sitting down to write the music, which came together quickly, in a span of about 10 days.

His discography is as diverse as the world ecology he strives to save, ranging from saxophone trio to full jazz orchestra with strings. With this band and for this cause, he followed more of a contemporary jazz playbook, a cross-pollination along the genetic lines of Weather Report, Pat Metheny Group and Steely Dan, acknowledging an intention to make the music more universally accessible for the sake of the message.

The results are energetic, catchy and colorful. Landrus attempted to capture the essence of each animal with a musical analogy. On “Canopy Of Trees,” the intervals of thirds reflect the calls of orangutans. He explained, “I watched a lot of videos to hear their interactions. I kept listening to these different calls from different animals, same species, and they were all using major thirds. They were pitched differently — a different starting point, whether they were going down or up, and that was fascinating to me.”

Landrus stressed the significance of the project to his band before and during the recording, having sent out information on the animals they were honoring. The players responded with unified urgency. “The session felt more meaningful than anything I had ever done. There was an intensity and a camaraderie that I think [is] very rare, in my experience of session work,” he said.

Save the Elephants will be using Landrus’ music in its own outreach and awareness projects. He plans to go to Africa next year to meet the people on the front lines for the group.

“I would love to do some concerts out there, and we’ve talked about that,” he said. “They’re doing a lot more important work on the ground than I can do. I’m happy to raise funds for them and do as much as I can, but they’re literally putting their lives on the line with poachers.”

Yet, Landrus has found new meaning from putting his talents in service for a larger cause. “If I could do anything to help get the word out and make something positive happen from this, then that would be the best reason for,” he paused, “living.”

— Gary Fukushima
THE PANDEMIC NOT ONLY SHUT DOWN clubs, concert halls and festivals, but tours ground to a halt and the urge to travel in search of arts-minded musicians was thwarted.

But a careful reopening has replaced doom-and-gloom with surviving clubs presenting again and land-locked festivals penciling in acts and selling tickets.

The same is true when it comes to jazz on the high seas. Jazz cruises that connected artists and audiences in one of the most unique ways possible were completely and cruelly grounded during the past two years. But that tide finally looks to be turning, said Michael Lazaroff, executive director of the jazz-fueled Entertainment Cruise Productions.

Its three marquee, weeklong jazz excursions — The Jazz Cruise, which started in 2001; the two Smooth Jazz Cruises, which first got off the docks in 2004; and the Blue Note at Sea Cruise, the youngest and most adventurous, first setting sail in 2017 — are on course to return to the salt waters in 2023 with cruises in January and February.

The fact that the cruises have returned is a small miracle considering the toll the pandemic took. Cancellations affected more than 8,000 passengers, with an income dive of $29 million. “We dug deep into our resources to be able to hang on,” said the St. Louis-based Lazaroff. “We kept pushing everything back to the next year. We addressed everyone’s setbacks. But we’re happy that more than 6,000 people rebooked for ’23. We have a group of guests from over the years who have been very loyal and very supportive. Since we started, more than 120,000 people have been entertained, while more than 5,000 people have gone on four or more cruises.”

Lazaroff said he’s happy to say cabins are selling quickly. “I’m very excited to be sailing again,” he noted. “Hopefully we’ve reached the end of all this mess. Maybe life will go back to the way it has been for us.”

Lazaroff stressed that the cruises are not typical festivals, “There is no festival or event in the world that compares to our jazz cruises. Our bands don’t have to worry about packing up each night to travel to their next stops on a tour without much offstage interactions.” Instead, the cruises plunge an act into immersion, where the music and parties continue non-stop as one multi-venue space existing with little sense of time.

More than 250 hours of jazz are performed by over 100 musicians, from headliners to top-notch support groups. There are daytime shows (some around the pool), concert-dinner performances and the ever-present late-night/early-morning jams.

“The fans may spend the money for these cruises, but we buy the services of the greatest artists who get the finest sound,” said Lazaroff, who books talent for each cruise. “I spend $5 million on jazz musicians. I want to create an interactive experience where, up-close, the crowd gets excited. That turns on the performers who kick it up a notch.”

He also added that he’s happy to give employment to the artists. “We sail in January and February when artists often aren’t very busy,” he said. “We provide a good pay day until the summer when they may be touring.”

A 10-year veteran performer on Lazaroff’s jazz cruises, trumpeter Randy Brecker cham-
pions the warm weather and calm breezes at sea instead of the deep winter back home. “This is the greatest event of the year,” he said. “It’s not only the best festival, but it’s also features the best jazz players. Starting at 10 a.m. and going to 2 a.m., you always have the choice of hearing amazing music. It’s a great way to start out the new year.”

Performing on both The Jazz Cruise and the Blue Note at Sea Cruise, Brecker opts out of visiting ports of call in favor of hanging on the ship. “I’m not into sightseeing, so I stay onboard,” he said. “The jazz fans are respectful, cool and friendly. It’s nice to be around them.” As for his colleagues, Brecker embraces the hang. “We all get to see other in one fell swoop,” he said. “We see each other in the hallways, at the restaurants, in the room where food is always available. It’s quite a reunion, but I also make a lot of new musician friends.”

Lazaroff said he’s learned a lot in booking The Jazz Cruise and the Smooth Jazz Cruise. For the latter, he admitted that, at first, he didn’t know a thing about the music. Lazaroff’s new love is the Blue Note sail. “What happens there is the real music,” he said. “No categories, no rules, no restrictions. Just good music.”

Next year’s program, slated for Jan. 13–20, is packed, including Cécile McLorin Salvant, Christian McBride, Brad Mehldau, Chief Adjuah (aka Christian Scott), the Baylor Project, Sheila E., David Sanborn, Chris Botti and more. Hosting the main shows will be Marcus Miller, Robert Glasper, Don Was and comedian Alonzo Bodden.

Other featured performers include Brecker, Cyrille Aimée, Gerald Clayton, Emmet Cohen, Derrick Hodge, José James, Julian Lage and others. Eric Marienthal serves as musical director. Expect Marienthal and Brecker to play music from their recent duo album, Double Dealin’.

The Blue Note cruise came about serendipitously. Lazaroff was asked by the Cunard Cruise Lines to advise the mammoth company on how to modernize its entertainment. He suggested jazz on a full-charter Cunard ship. His first stop was to contact Don Was, the head of Blue Note Records, knowing full well that it had a “contorted relationship” with the Blue Note Entertainment Group (which includes the Blue Note jazz clubs), since the two organizations share a name.

“Don liked the idea but was obligated to present this to the entertainment group, which thought the link was terrific,” Lazaroff said. “Two thousand jazz fans are going to love this for seven days and seven nights.”

For a different experience, the Jazz Cruise sails from Fort Lauderdale, Florida, Jan. 6–13 on the Celebrity Millennium. Its ports of call include Costa Meza, Cozumel and Nassau. The headliners on this straightahead cruise include Wynton Marsalis, Dee Dee Bridgewater (who headlined the very first Jazz Cruise event in 2001), Christian McBride, Kurt Elling, Bill Charlap and several others with John Clayton directing the big bands. Expect inspired sets by Bridgewater and Charlap, who have been collaborating lately with a future album in mind.

The Smooth Jazz Cruise, billed as The Greatest Party at Sea, takes place twice in 2023 (Jan. 20–27; Jan. 27–Feb. 3). The first roundtrip sail leaves Fort Lauderdale with ports of call in Grand Cayman, Cozumel and Grand Bahama Island. The second’s ports of call include Costa Meza, Cozumel and Nassau.

The smooth lineups include Marcus Miller, Candy Dulfer, Jonathan Butler, Boney James, Mindi Abair, Take 6, Michael McDonald, Peter White, Gerald Albright and more. It’s a packed crowd of musicians for a full ship of fans.

Reading this in summer may feel like a vacation in warm weather is far away, but the steamy days are fleeting. Come January, sea, sun and a sweet breeze will go well with jazz again.

—Dan Ouellette
Grace Kelly Joins Berklee Board:
Saxophonist Grace Kelly has been named to Berklee College of Music’s Board of Trustees, becoming the youngest board member in Berklee history at the age of 30. “Grace Kelly is not only a singular musical talent, but her passion for creating, sharing, teaching and healing through her art has led her to become an incredible ambassador and community leader,” said Martin Mannion, board chair.

Presenting Wayne Shorter Way:
WBGO, Newark Public Radio, celebrated renaming of the street in front of the station in honor of saxophonist/composer Wayne Shorter, a beloved son of the New Jersey city. Shorter, also known as the Newark Flash, grew up in the city’s Ironbound section and attended Newark Arts High. With the renaming, WBGO and neighboring New Jersey Performing Arts Center reside appropriately at the corner of Wayne Shorter Way and Sarah Vaughan Way. Vaughan was also a Newark native.

Gonzalez Announces Nine-PM:
Music business pro Anthony Gonzalez has launched Nine-PM Records, a new jazz label “dedicated to the genre of jazz, from traditional to neo-contemporary and all the sub-genres of jazz.” Gonzalez manages Latin Grammy Award-winning flutist Nestor Torres, who will deliver the label’s first record.

Jenkins Delivers Jazzology:
Savage Content has launched a web series where guests compete by testing their jazz knowledge. Jazzology is an friendly competition between seasoned jazz enthusiasts. The series, which runs alternate Fridays on Savage Content’s official YouTube channel, is hosted by veteran jazz promoter and journalist Willard Jenkins. “Jazzology helps keep alive the rich history of an art form that has inspired so much of today’s music, and we’ve come up with a great format to test someone’s musicology in both an enjoyable and challenging way,” Jenkins said.

You Need (to Read) This!

“You actually need this record in your life,” said IF Music owner Jean-Claude. “YOU NEED THIS! IT’S BECOME MY MANTRA,” said irrepressible record man Jean-Claude of IF Music in London during a Zoom interview. The London vinyl retailer triples as a DJ and producer of deep-dive compilations, the most recent being IF Music Presents You Need This!: An Introduction to Enja Records (BBE Music). And at age 60 he’s easily as enthusiastic as a teenager about his personal musical tastes and discoveries.

“It really goes back to when I worked in my first record shop,” he explained. “Customers would come in and ask, ‘What do I need?’ and my answer was, ‘You need this!’ It wasn’t a question of whether you knew it or whether you wanted it — you actually need this record in your life, because it will make your life better.”

A collector’s “need” may be negotiable, but there’s no doubt Jean-Claude has generated hours of invaluable listening by applying refined taste to generating compilations, remixes and (until pandemic shutdowns) tracks sequenced for parties around the world. He drags along cartons of esoteric EPs and LPs, even to far-flung sets.

“I don’t play off memory sticks or CDs,” he scoffed, “because vinyl is vinyl. I don’t call myself a purist, because I have nothing against technology. But I understand about compression. I can hear the differences between analog sound and MP3s, and after all, I own a record shop, so I shouldn’t DJ using digital files then turn around and sell records,” he said. “There are serious pitfalls when you don’t compromise, but take the rough with the smooth, right?”

Sure, how else? Jean-Claude has been a true believer in high-quality music across genres — jazz, of course, but also hip-hop, funk, blue-eyed soul, classic r&b and soundtracks — some 40 years ago. In the 1990s, he formed a duo, The Amalgamation of Soundz, with fellow DJ Mark Harbottle. They ran shows and released albums, including Blue Note and Disney remixes during the United Kingdom’s “halcyon house and technology” days, until 2008, “when sampling went atomic.” He did analog arranging, editing and sequencing; digital tech wasn’t his thing.

Jean-Claude opened IF Music in 2003 in the Soho neighborhood, which he left in 2020, due to COVID. Today he hosts two radio programs and a video chat show and deals vinyl and associated merch from the IF Music website.

Indeed, Jean-Claude’s You Need This! compilations such as his intro to Enja convey a personal stamp rather than doubling down on fan favorites or cultish obscurities. Tracks by acclaimed pianists Abdullah Ibrahim (Dollar Brand) and Mal Waldron, trumpeter Marvin Hannibal Peterson, bassist Cecil McBee, vibraphonist Bobby Hutcherson and singer Jon Hendricks buttress those by lesser known, but equally beguiling, reedsman Prince Lasha, oud player Rabih Abou-Khalil, saxophonist John Stubblefield, guitarist/sitarist Nana Simopoulus and multi-instrumentalist/composer Marc Levin.

Packaged as two platters in a gatefold cover with Jean-Claude’s extensive liner notes, the Enja music offers a colorful, provocative, spirited if not parochially spiritual vibe. The result is a varied but cohesive collection, inviting newcomers with surprises for longtime Enja devotees, too.

His previous BBE compilations include three volumes titled Journey Into Deep Jazz. He plans to curate an Abou-Khalil anthology and a soul-funk compilation. But Jean-Claude’s next compilation will celebrate the 20th birthday of If Music with players from the bubbling U.K. new jazz scene. “There are a lot of great jazz artists in England who haven’t gotten the support, the hype, the love, the column inches,” he said, hoping to do something about it. — Howard Mandel
JoVia Armstrong

JOVIA ARMSTRONG SPECIALIZES IN CREATING SONIC UNIVERSES. “That ingenuity goes beyond her gifts as a drummer, percussionist and composer as evidenced by her debut album, The Antidote Suite (Black Earth Music), an engrossing, Afrofuturistic voyage, centered on healing.

Threads of techno, future soul, hip-hop and chamber jazz float throughout the five-part adventure as Armstrong sublimely reconciles electronic ingenuity and left-wing jazz improvisation. She crafts the music with her Eunoia Society, a group of kindred spirits who collectively perform euphoric improvisations intended to seduce audiences into personal introspection. With Armstrong playing a hybrid cajon drum kit, the remaining members consist of electric bassist Damon Warmack and violinist/viola player Leslie DeShazor. The music broadens with guests that include guitarist Jeff Parker, bassist Isaiah Sharkley, keyboardist Amr Fahmy, singer Yaw Agyeman, rapper Teh’Ray Hale and flutist Nicole Mitchell, who owns Black Earth Music.

“This music is about contemplation and meditation,” Armstrong explained. “Back in the ’60s, we had John Coltrane and Alice Coltrane doing what has been deemed as ‘spiritual jazz.’ I’m going into that realm but using electronics and cave technology. In ancient society, people would go into caves to worship, to do rituals, to hold their ceremonies. This is a place that has a ton of reverb and reflections. There are these reflections, which is what we do when we meditate.”

With her technology experience, Armstrong transports audiences into immersive worlds where the sonic designs travel naturally instead of emitting from conventional front speakers with left and right channels.

In late May, she was preparing for the oral defense of her doctorate dissertation, “Black Space: Composing Meditative Music Through the Black Lens to Combat Unconscious Bias,” at the University of California Irvine. There, she was a doctoral degree candidate in the Integrated Composition Improvisation and Technology program. When explaining the program in which many musicians use electronics to create their art, Armstrong said that she’s more interested in manipulating computer hardware than mastering software programs. With her strong background in expansive jazz and R&B, it’s vital for Armstrong to have kinetic live instrumentation in her music. But the manipulations of computer hardware enable the Eunoia Society to provide new personalized colors and textures.

“We have various sounds flying around the room,” she said. “We invite the audience to not just sit in their seats and listen but become participants in the sonic world. They were able to walk around the venue and listen to the sounds move around them. In the real world, this is how we hear sound.”

Armstrong grew up in Detroit, where techno, Blackness and pioneering music coincide. The Mother City is home to a swath pioneering Black techno, deep house and hip-hop artists such as Carl Craig, Derrick May, Moodymann, Jeff Mills, Theo Parrish and J Dilla. Detroit was also the city where Parliament-Funkadelic recorded most of its Afrofuturistic funk classics. One of Armstrong’s early mentors was drummer, percussionist Francisco Mora Catlett, who worked with Sun Ra, and has released his own Afrofuturistic works such as the Henry Dumas-inspired Rare Metal.

She continued developing her craft in Chicago, where she linked up with the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians. Through drummer Vincent Davis, Armstrong met Mitchell at an ACCM event in 2000. During that time though, Armstrong quit music because of her encounter with rampant sexism. Mitchell began hiring Armstrong regularly, which helped revitalize her music career. “We’ve been working together ever since,” Armstrong said. “She’s a really close friend and a mentor.”

In Chicago, Armstrong taught kids music software like ProTools, Garage Band and Logic.

“Now, I want to show Black kids how to build their own computers, because every time I’m at a NAMM show, I don’t see us,” she said. “After years of going to NAMM shows, it really started to dawn upon me, as Black people, we always seem to be accepted as performers. But when it comes to manufacturing, how do we get into those spaces? We know how to use the tools. We’ll learn them inside and out. But what could we do if we built these machines? What type of creativity would we conjure up as technologists?”

—John Murph
On the surface of things, it seems counterintuitive that DownBeat critics would name the same musician both Jazz Artist of the Year and Beyond Artist of the Year — until you learn that the musician in question is Jon Batiste, and suddenly the double billing makes sense.

Batiste actively promotes the normalization of musical ambidexterity. True, many contemporary musicians embrace the ethos of creative pluralism — why would anyone want to limit their musical identity? Even so, nobody does it better, or more fully, than Batiste.

Consider his Grammy sweep this year. Batiste scored 11 nominations, including those for Best Roots Song, Best R&B Album, Best Jazz Instrumental Album, Best Contemporary Classical Composition, Best Music Video, and Best Score Soundtrack for Visual Media. Of these nominations, he took home five trophies, among them the prized Album of the Year award for We Are (Verve), a musical tour de force that earned top honors as Beyond Album of the Year in the 70th Annual DownBeat Critics Poll.

We caught up with Batiste in early June, just after he’d rallied from a bout with COVID. The timing of his illness couldn’t have been worse, mere days before the Carnegie Hall premiere of American Symphony — an opus he’d spent more than three years composing — originally scheduled for May 7. He was forced to postpone the concert, now rescheduled for September.

“It really hit me hard. I had COVID and pneumonia simultaneously, so I was out for about two-and-a-half weeks at home, alone,” he recalled. “It really deflated a lot of things.”

Batiste also worried about infecting his wife, Emmy-Award winning journalist and author Suleika Jaouad, who is immunno-compromised.
Jon Batiste's
SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Batiste performing at the 2018 Monterey Jazz Festival.
that we talk about our national heritage. Understood new music today, but in the way cultural evolution not just in the way that we a little bit gave a wider variety of people the chance to transform the educational practices relevant for understanding of American culture and opportunity now to have a deeper, more relevantly for a more equitable future, understands the importance of living in the present.

I don’t have any goals in my day other than to love [Suleika] thoroughly and to commit to what that entails in the peaks and valleys of her illness,” Batiste said. “We look at each day as, ‘This is what we have.’ It’s a long road. But it’s made me realize that we’re all going to have this moment where we’re at the edge of our mortality. It does us all a service to look at each day, and our most cherished loved ones, like that. If we’re not doing that, then we’re not doing it right. More than anything, that [realization] has been a gift in this struggle.”

Batiste met Joauad at the Skidmore Jazz Institute when they were just teenagers, before he earned his jazz degrees at Juilliard and launched his career as a musician under the careful mentorship of jazz artists like Curtis Fuller, Louis Hayes, Mulgrew Miller, Roy Hargrove and Wynton Marsalis. He notes that what followed, in both his private and personal lives, emerged from those fertile musical environments.

“It’s so deep,” he reflected. “Just to see where I am now, with all of these incredible opportunities to share my art and to be a light in the world, but also to have this keen awareness of my own mortality. And to think that it started with this skinny kid from Louisiana coming to New York at 17 years old, wanting to play jazz. It’s just incredible.”
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The serious-minded, soft-spoken pianist and composer, who died of cancer in 2017 at age 60, was humble enough that she might have been surprised at her induction into the DownBeat Hall of Fame.

“Geri didn’t really know how people felt about her,” said drummer/composer Carrington, a frequent collaborator. “That’s why we have to acknowledge our genius players while they’re here.” Friends and fellow musicians interviewed for this article said she would have been overjoyed by the honor, however.

“She was, like Betty Carter, a musician’s musician,” said Ora Harris, Allen’s longtime manager, who also managed Carter. “Musicians adored Geri. She never knew how much she was loved. I would tell her all the time how revered she was.”

Allen long ago secured her reputation as a piano powerhouse with dazzling technique, a post-bop composer who, while steeped in jazz tradition, was also a restless, profoundly creative experimentalist. One of the more eclectic pianists in jazz history, she blurred distinctions between jazz and what has come to be called creative or serious music (with a poverty of expression). She could groove, or not; swing, or not; play any style, from classical to bop to free and atonal. Her original investigations of rhythm — for example, “Drummer’s Song,” or “The Dancer” (featuring tap dancer Maurice Chestnut) — were wildly inventive. She could take diverse source material, even a Christmas carol like “Angels We Have Heard On High,” and make something startlingly new from it. And when she played standards, Allen never sounded more like her own unique self, and no one else.
In this music, there was before Geri Allen and after Geri Allen. She’s that important," wrote pianist Ethan Iverson in 2017. Just two weeks before her death, Iverson elaborated on his Do The Math blog in honor of Allen’s 60th birthday: "Kenny Kirkland took the virtuosic McCoy Tyner/Herbie Hancock/Chick Corea axis to its logical endpoint. Around the time of Kirkland’s greatest prominence, Geri Allen broke something open by offering a radically different approach, bringing back the surrealism of Thelonious Monk and Eric Dolphy. Allen’s solution would go on to be vastly influential. There were other avant-garde artists from the late ‘80s and early ‘90s, perhaps most notably Marcus Roberts and Brad Mehldau. Many of the celebrated younger pianists of the current moment — a recent poll has names like Jason Moran, Vijay Iyer, Craig Taborn, David Virelles, Kris Davis, Matt Mitchell, Aruán Ortiz — don’t play like Kirkland, Roberts or Mehldau. They play like Allen.

Allen told critic Ted Panken in 2010 that she was comfortable crossing stylistic lines and incorporating both inside and outside approaches. "I don’t see this as a conflict," she said. "All artists have the right to make a statement, and it’s my right to interject all my influences, to walk through different points of view, to give respect to all these musics I love while remaining grounded in jazz as my core expression and embracing the rigors of that choice."

Allen had her own harmonic and melodic identity. According to Carrington, "Everybody has a bit of their own language, but some are more individual than others. Some have said playing Geri’s pieces made them a better pianist. They are so unique to her that it can be hard to hear other people play her music. And some of the pieces she wrote only she could play."

Allen’s wide-ranging approach was the product of a lifelong immersion in the jazz repertoire, a strong work ethic, and rigorous academic training. Born in Pontiac, Michigan, in 1957, she grew up in Detroit, the daughter of a defense-contract administrator for the federal government and a principal in the Detroit school system. By the time she was a young teen she knew she wanted to be a jazz musician. At Cass Technical High School in Detroit, which produced bassist Paul Chambers and trumpeter Donald Byrd, she studied with trumpeter and educator Marcus Belgrave. Later, at Howard University, she became one of the first students to graduate with a degree in jazz studies, in a program directed by Byrd.

She went on to earn a master’s degree in ethnomusicology from the University of Pittsburgh in 1982. Teaching stints followed whom she dedicated the song “In Appreciation.”

Her commitment to others manifested itself in her devotion to teaching and, in particular, to inspiring the next generation of women. Some of today’s most accomplished female jazz artists, like the composers/bassists Spalding and Linda May Han Oh, have cited her as a major influence on both their art and their sense of what was possible. Allen served as program director for the annual All-Female Jazz Residency of the New Jersey Performing Arts Center (NJPAC). She was about “ensuring that women had a sense of place and agency and power,” as pianist Jason Moran told journalist Shaun Brady shortly after her death.

“She always wanted to do big projects,” Harris recalled. “In 2006, she wanted to celebrate women in jazz, and she wanted to do it at The Apollo Theater. My job was to make it happen. Dianne Reeves, Terri Lyne, Lizz Wright were all part of it. It was a dramatic production called ‘Great Apollo Women,’ and it was beautiful.” After the tragedy of 9/11, Allen conceived For the Healing of the Nations, a sacred jazz work, in tribute to the victims and survivors. “It featured AfroBlue, the choral ensemble from Howard University. She just woke up one day, and it was all in her head," Harris said. Allen had three children with her husband, the late trumpeter Wallace Roney. Asked by jazz writer John Murph about her secret to balancing a career and a family, Allen replied with a laugh, “I don’t want to talk about it, because as soon as you talk about it, everything falls apart. I just pray a lot.” The marriage ended in divorce.

When the children were young, Allen would frequently bring them with her to gigs. “There is a photo in which Geri is performing at the piano, and she has a child on her back in a papoose,” Harris said. “Sometimes one or two of them would be under her piano bench, very quiet. But she wouldn’t leave them in the dressing room.”

She was deeply spiritual. Herzen said, “Geri used to tell me that her favorite Bible quote is from Luke 1:37, ‘For nothing will be impossible with God.’” Her life seemed to embody that maxim.

Allen was a lifelong churchgoer. “We used to go to Bethany Baptist Church, near her home in Upper Montclair,” Harris said. “It was Saturday night at the Vanguard, Sunday morning in church, no matter how late we had been out. And I had to go; it wasn’t optional. “I think it began with her family,” she added. “Her father and mother were jazz lovers but embedded in the church. She grew up in the church, and it stuck with her all her life. Her spiritual view was her North Star. There was always a spiritual component in her thoughts. I’m a believer, too, like Geri, an old Southern Baptist. [She needed] something to believe in beyond herself.”

‘EVERYBODY HAS A BIT OF THEIR OWN LANGUAGE, BUT SOME ARE MORE INDIVIDUAL THAN OTHERS.’

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ALBUM OF THE YEAR
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OF THE YEAR
THE SOUND OF THE MOMENT

A recording may become Jazz Album of the Year by epitomizing the sound of the moment or by pointing the direction where music is going next.

Without meaning to do so, tenor saxophonist James Brandon Lewis conceived precisely the music that a lot of people needed to hear, and recorded it with a band that pushed its leader to new heights.

*Jesup Wagon* is dedicated to Dr. George Washington Carver (1864–1943), a son of slaves whose boundary-defying life accrued accomplishments in music and painting, in addition to transformative advancements in investigative and applied sciences. It is named after the vehicle that Carver used to travel the American South in order to teach farming communities sustainable practices.

The album’s seven compositions pay homage to the plants and practices that Carver cultivated and studied, as well as places where he worked and the communities he strove to uplift. Celebrating an African-American scholar who dedicated his life to the redemptive potential of scientific inquiry, community service and creative practice made *Jesup Wagon* a welcome balm upon its release last May — after more than a year of the COVID-19 pandemic and amid an ongoing plague of increasingly toxic social discourse.

Lewis’ horn opens the title track, calling the proceedings to order, punctuating incantatory phrases with coarse cries. After about a minute of solo saxophone, the other members of Red Lily Quintet, DownBeat’s Rising Star Group of the Year — convened specifically for *Jesup Wagon* — join him.
Cornetist Kirk Knuffke’s high notes vault over the saxophonist’s broad-shouldered statement, cellist Chris Hoffman plucks a jubilant countermelody and drummer Chad Taylor strikes up a surging attack that feels nearly out of control but anchors the actions with martial precision. Then the horn-and-string coin flips as Knuffke and Hoffman drop out while Lewis returns in tandem with bassist William Parker.

By the time the track is done, there’s a good chance that whatever blues have been dogging you have been banished.

‘THERE’S A LOT OF LYRICISM IN ALL OF MY MUSIC, AND A LOT OF EMOTION.’

On subsequent tracks, Parker sometimes switches to the guembri, a Moroccan bass lute, and Taylor to the mbira, a Zimbabwean thumb piano. Speaking by video-chat from Pittsburgh, where his trio was set to perform with a pair of wordsmiths at City of Asylum on the final night of Jazz Poetry Month 2022, Lewis explains, “I wanted instruments that represented the Earth. They sound organic, they sound not electrified, and I needed that to convey some soil.”

On Jesup Wagon, tones establish character; themes and rhythms evoke cinematic visions. “Arachis,” which is named after the Latin appellation for the peanut, grew from an image of Carver in the lab with his students, using Bunsen burners. “I’m literally imagining visuals; I’m trying to paint with that,” Lewis says. “There’s a lot of lyricism in all of my music, and a lot of emotion. It’s pretty much drenched in emotion, without being overly sappy.”

The empathic support that the rest of Red Lily Quintet brings to the album is especially remarkable given that the group had little time a unit prior to the recording. However, the musicians were hardly strangers. “Individually, I play with all of these folks,” says Lewis. “Chad and I have a duo. William and I have worked together for the last 10 years in different ensembles. I met Kirk in like 2013, and we haven’t played a lot together, but we’ve played enough. Actually, one of the first conversations that he and I ever had was about George Washington Carver. The only person that I’d only played with once was Chris Hoffman.”

Lewis is both bemused and grateful about the ongoing positive response to Jesup Wagon. “I don’t know why this album specifically resonated with so many people, but it did, and that’s cool, and I’m thankful that it did.” He reckons that the praise it draws reflects not only upon him, but the musicians who have inspired, guided, and encouraged him. “This album wasn’t all about me,” he says. “It was about the community of people doing work on the fringes, and when the album wins, we all win. Those who paved the way for me, the Wadada Leo Smiths, the Anthony Braxtons, the Henry Threadgills of the world, the William Parkers and Matthew Shipp, all of these people, Angelica Sanchez, and I ever had was about George Washington Carver. I would say that molecular is my sabbatical, entering a new environment rather than division.”
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That assumption was upended with the October 2021 release on Impulse! of a private recording made some two months later, on Saturday, Oct. 2, 1965, the last night of a six-night stand at Seattle's Penthouse jazz club, the same engagement that also yielded the professionally recorded album *Live In Seattle*. The new tapes were found by Seattle saxophonist Steve Griggs in a vast collection left by another Seattle sax man, the late educator and activist Joe Brazil. Griggs made the discovery while sorting and digitizing Brazil's collection of 750 reel-to-real tapes and 80 videos, many made while Brazil taught jazz history at the University of Washington. Griggs still remembers the exact date he realized what he had found.

“It was April 24, 2015,” he said. “I heard ‘Psalm’ first, and I was blown away, because I knew it was rare, that he never played it in public, except in France. But then when I turned the tape over and realized here's Joe Brazil doing his matinee set, then it ends, then the next thing is the opening fanfare (of “Acknowledgment”), and — Oh, my God! — I realized the whole suite is here.”

More than a mere rarity, the new recording is an avant-garde gem that offers new insights into Coltrane's iconic work. At 75:28, it runs more than twice as long as the original studio recording and has a loose, open-ended, wilder feel, which lives up to the Penthouse billing of a “John Coltrane Jam Session.” In addition to the members of what is now known as the classic quartet — pianist McCoy Tyner, bassist Jimmy Garrison, drummer Elvin Jones — the Penthouse band featured saxophonist Pharoah Sanders and bassist Donald Rafael Garrett, plus then-Seattle resident, alto saxophonist Carlos Ward, who sat in after opening for Coltrane as part of Brazil's band on the Saturday matinee. The new players brought the shrieks, dissonance and diffuse rhythmic patterns of free jazz to the bandstand, as well as doubling atmospherically on an array of percussion instruments.

Between the four movements of the original piece — “Acknowledgement,” “Resolution,” “Pursuance” and “Psalm” — Coltrane made room for solo features, presented rather arbitrarily on the album as separate tracks called “interludes.” The first is a sinuous bass duet, with Garrett playing deftly in the upper range; the second, a smacking solo by Jones with some splendid cymbal work. Interludes three...
and four are actually one long, often jaunty solo by Garrison that was interrupted by a change of reels (admirably spliced). Surprisingly, and perhaps a disappointment for some listeners, the sidemen’s solos outshine those of Coltrane himself. Tyner thunders and sparkles through a long, splendid outing on “Pursuance.” Sanders howls with intensity on “Acknowledgement” and “Pursuance”; and Ward offers a stuttering, urgently expressive solo on “Resolution” that makes it clear he has been listening to both Ornette Coleman and Eric Dolphy.

Many locals still vividly remember Coltrane’s engagement at the Penthouse, which regularly hosted A-list acts such as Miles Davis, Stan Getz, Carmen McRae and Oscar Peterson. Bassist David Friesen, who along with Ward played in the house band with Brazil, recalled that “everyone seemed to know that something special was going to happen.”

Indeed, the program was a shocking departure. The first couple of nights, the sets went on so long that Penthouse owner Charlie Puzzo, though no philistine and an adamant champion of jazz, told Griggs he had to ask Coltrane to take breaks so he could turn the house and sell more drinks. Coltrane complied, but the crowd was still not quite ready for what it heard.

“A lot of people, myself included, still had in mind Coltrane the ballad player with the Miles [Davis] Quintet,” said Seattle DJ Jim Wilke, who broadcast part of the Thursday night set on KING-FM. “It was hard to get a handle on.”

For Seattle bassist Pete Leinonen, Ward was the clear standout of the night. Coltrane apparently agreed. After the set, he encouraged Ward to move to New York, where he later famously played with Abdullah Ibrahim’s jazz octet, Ekaya.

Such on-the-scene comments highlight just how differently we regard *A Love Supreme* today than we might have in 1965, none more so than this intriguing recollection by Seattle composer-pianist Marius Nordal: “I saw the Saturday one where he filled the set with just one piece. It was so powerful that at the end, people were glassy-eyed and stunned and there was little applause. One professional-looking guy with a grey goatee stood up to do a lonely, clapping ovation … as if to say, ‘What’s wrong with you people? Don’t you realize what you’ve just heard?’”

That night in the fall of 1965, *A Love Supreme* had only been on sale for nine months. It’s a good bet that very few people knew what they were hearing, especially since Coltrane never even announced the piece.

“It’s as if, said Coltrane biographer Lewis Porter, Coltrane were telling his band, ‘You want to jam on it? That’s fine.’ Trane was almost ridiculously humble. He was not self-important, so even if he may have thought of this [*A Love Supreme*] as his big statement, that doesn’t mean he saw it as an important moment for everyone else.

“I am a very level-headed person,” he added. “I never jump out of my seat. But believe me, when I heard this my heart was pumping.”

Could other live versions of *A Love Supreme* surface? “Hearing him play it informally in October ’65 makes me think there’s no reason to assume that he didn’t play it at other clubs,” Porter said.

Still, why did Coltrane perform *A Love Supreme* in Seattle? Joe Brazil may be the answer. Brazil knew Coltrane in Detroit, where they often compared notes on Eastern spirituality, in particular, the Hindu scripture the Bhagavad Gita. In a 1989 oral history interview, Brazil said he had “about 10 versions of the Gita, the ‘Hindu Bible’, and Trane was interested in some of those versions that I had.” While Coltrane was in Seattle, he and Brazil spent time discussing spiritual interests and also recorded the overtly spiritual album *Om*, with Brazil playing wooden flute. It’s not a stretch to credit Brazil with putting Coltrane in the frame that prompted him to revisit *A Love Supreme*. Griggs agrees.

“The more I tried to re-create the scene of Coltrane in Seattle, the more Joe Brazil became the main thread,” he said.

Whatever the reason behind Coltrane’s decision to revisit his masterpiece, we are lucky to have it and can only hope it will lead to the discovery of many more.
Leading a secluded life in the expansive hill country above Montecito, California, Charles Lloyd has plenty of time and space for contemplation.

And when he gathers his thoughts, Lloyd — a veteran of the counter-culture wars who famously tuned in, turned on and dropped out — will sometimes veer from the light. “I’m paranoid,” the saxophonist, flutist and composer said in a late-May Zoom call from his home, “because I was around in the ’60s and wanted to change the world with the beautiful stuff of music, and I haven’t done that.”

But, Lloyd said he is also an “obstinate” sort. A self-described dreamer, he won’t quite give up on the power of music to heal or its ability to transport him back to moments in his life when he has put that power to work.

And he has found no better vehicle for such trips than his poll-topping Jazz Group of the Year: Charles Lloyd & the Marvels.

The Marvels, in fact, were hatched out of a desire to recapture a moment of spiritual oneness when, as a young man of color, Lloyd played with Al Vescovo, a white pedal steel guitarist, and, in doing so, bridged the racial divide in his hometown of Memphis. Decades later, on Nov. 15, 2013, he invited pedal steel guitarist Greg Leisz to join him and his working group — electric guitarist Bill Frisell, bassist Reuben Rogers and drummer Eric Harland — for a trial-by-fire audition during a concert at Royce Hall at UCLA. The resulting interaction, he said, was a marvel, and the quintet, name and all, was born.

“I was so enthralled,” he recalled. “Al Vescovo had come back to me.”

Since then, the Marvels have provided many opportunities for Lloyd to commune with old buddies. He does so with Ornette Coleman on “Peace” and “Ramblin’,” two cantering Coleman covers on the Marvels’ latest album, *Tone Poem* (Blue Note, 2021). Coleman, he said, was a fellow traveler in 1950s Los Angeles, sharing with him all manner of sustenance, musical and otherwise, before decamping for New York at the end of the decade. Lloyd followed a year later.
“I just wanted to say hello to him,” Lloyd said in explaining why he played the Coleman tunes.

Lloyd’s musical chats with Thelonious Monk are marked with some frequency, too. They are also touched by melancholy, based on a rendering of “Monk’s Mood” that appears on the Marvels’ 2018 album *Vanished Gardens* (Blue Note) and on a slightly evolved version included on *Tone Poem*.

Wistfully, Lloyd recalled that, as a relative novice on the New York scene, he once naively ignored Monk’s offer to join his group because it came through a third party. He regrets that decision to this day.

“I speak to Monk all the time,” he said. That Lloyd speaks to old colleagues through music does not mean that the music dwells in the past. To the contrary. Lloyd’s interpretations of any given tune are timeless marvels of rolling invention that subtly shift from moment to moment, night to night and, ultimately, year to year until the tune’s possibilities seem spent and it is temporarily removed from rotation, according to Rogers, who has been a fixture in Lloyd’s ensembles for 18 years.

“We’ll put a song away for four or five years and bring it back,” he explained. “It’s fresh again. Then we’re able to expand on it. That’s been his thing all his life.”

Beyond the practice of rotating tunes, the addition of Frisell and, on the guitarist’s recommendation, Leisz (the two had a long working relationship that predated their work with Lloyd) has conspicuously altered the atmospherics, yielding the kind of billowing sonic bed on which Lloyd’s otherworldly expansions sit so naturally.

In fact, it’s remarkable he has only assembled the unit in the past decade.

“It feels like we’ve been playing together for a couple of lifetimes,” Frisell said.

In part, Frisell’s feeling of familiarity reflects the openness of thinking and breadth of background he and Leisz have shared with Lloyd from that first concert at UCLA. Like Lloyd, who played with everyone from the Beach Boys to the Grateful Dead, Frisell and Leisz both had substantial experience playing with performers mainly known for their work outside the jazz world.

“Greg is like a brother to me,” Frisell said. “We had been playing since the late ’90s. We never had to figure out what to do.”

The Marvels’ first two albums found them collaborating with vocalists who either skirt the jazz world (Norah Jones, who laid down one track on their Blue Note debut, 2016’s *I Long To See You*) or operate largely in another realm (country star Willie Nelson, who also did a track on that album, and roots mainstay Lucinda Williams, who laid down multiple tracks on *Vanished Gardens*). While *Tone Poem* does not feature vocalists per se, Lloyd sees himself as one, though he decided early on that he could best give voice to his ideas through an external instrument.

“I’m a singer, and I have a saxophone now,” he said.

Lloyd made it clear that all his bandmates, and by extension their collective voice, must exhibit that singing quality. And he was confident they would do just that as he prepared to leave on a summer tour of North America and Europe that would include July dates with the Marvels in the U.K., Poland, Romania, Belgium and The Netherlands.

At the age of 84, Lloyd seems strong of mind and heart, and he has used the pandemic time for deeper contemplation. But the problems outside the confines of his house amid the hills haunt him, and so he will venture forth, seeking insight into why, despite the example of artists like himself, so many people still choose darkness over, as he has written, “the light of Peace ahead.”

“I’m raring to go out and play,” he said, “because I’ll find something that will explain the inexplicable.”

“Brilliance and wisdom abound in this treasure of a book that is pure Brookmeyer gold. We can all be thankful to Dave Rivello (whom Bob loved and trusted) for having the foresight to conduct these wonderful interviews. Thanks to Dave, Bob’s tremendous insights are not lost treasures, but ones that will continue to enrich us all.”

— Maria Schneider, composer and bandleader

“Dave, what a great idea! I can’t wait to get into the book and see the processes that Bob sometimes would glide over... as if we had an idea what he was talking about.”

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I didn’t want to leave pieces of things hanging out there with mistakes in them,” she said recently. As the pandemic’s impact eased, she has turned her attention to other projects. None has been more pressing than scheduling bookings for the 18-piece orchestra, which has won Large Jazz Ensemble of the Year in the 2022 Critics Poll, as it has every year since 2007.

After 18 months with no gigs — the longest period of inactivity in the band’s 30-year history — it reemerged at the outdoor DC Jazz Festival in September. The experience, according to Schneider, was imperfect: The set was short, the wind was unkind and a couple of tempos were a bit off. “It was a little rough,” she said.

Yet it also proved cathartic, allowing a long-awaited opportunity for the band to air material from its Grammy-winning double-disc opus Data Lords. Kinks notwithstanding, performances of pieces like “Don’t Be Evil,” “Sputnik” and the title tune offered evidence that all would be well. A few more gigs, ending with a week at Birdland in March, confirmed that proposition.

“We blew the stink off,” Schneider recalled with a smile.

The successful return was by no means preordained. A European tour set for February was called off because of a COVID spike. Beyond that, the December 2020 death of the band’s pianist and éminence grise, Frank Kimbrough, weighed heavily. The consensus replacement was Gary Versace, the band’s highly respected accordionist, but no one knew how that would alter the ensemble’s delicate balance.

“It’s hard when you have people, and your...
band is built around them, and they’re such a part of your sound,” Schneider said. “You’re wondering, ‘How is this going to change? Is it going to feel like a loss?’ There’s just a lot of emotions and things.”

“The whole band was feeling it. I think Gary was feeling it: ‘How do I come in and now make it my own, yet still honor the kind of dynamic that we built over the years,’ which also, by the way, was built by Gary.”

For his part, Versace was realistic: “There’s a transition period to adapt to a new person and a new musical voice on the instrument, because Frank was so much a part of what the band is. So I just try to respect that.”

While Versace felt the loss as much as anyone — Kimbrough was both a colleague and friend — the accordionist’s 20 years with the orchestra equipped him with the potential to take the piano chair and make it his own.

“They both have the esthetic of being great listeners and collaborators,” Schneider said, adding that Versace “carves out every note with the amplitude of how he touches the note. It’s not just the line, not just the chord. It’s how he caresses them.”

Versace, Schneider said, not only brought a new voice to the piano but also helped ease the way for Julien Labro, who had been occupying the accordion chair, a position made trickier by the presence of a guitar in the band.

“I have a rhythm section with three choral players — that’s a disaster, generally,” Schneider said. “So I value people who really appreciate not playing and listening and waiting for the right moment to make their entrance. Gary’s been helpful helping Julien find that space.”

She said Versace might lead her to try new kinds of writing for piano, and Labro, whose experience extends into the classical realm, might lead her down new avenues for accordion.

_Data Lords_, inspired partly by her collaboration with David Bowie and his penchant for the darker writing of her early period, represented something of a return to that mode. The album reflected her concerns about big technology companies. But that topic has, for the moment, run its course in her work.

“It’s on my mind, but I’m not making new discoveries about it,” she said. Rather, Schneider may be entering a more pastoral (if no less serious) period, like the one that reached its apotheosis with the Grammy-winning _The Thompson Fields_. That album drew on her childhood on a Minnesota farm.

She is at work on “The Great Potoo,” a piece about a bird she encountered on a trip to Brazil. While birds are a long-held interest, she said, she wasn’t aware that they would return as an artistic inspiration when she came up with the piece’s core motif. Yet, “After 15 years of not thinking about the potoo much, something in my head said, ‘Look up the potoo again on the internet. Remind yourself about that bird.’ When I saw it, I said, ‘Oh, my god, that’s what this piece is.’”

The bird emits a piercing sound that, in her mimicking, came across as something between a squawk and a shriek. The sound will be assigned to the trombone, she said, when she finishes adapting the work from a commission she has already produced for a group from the Eastman School of Music, where she received a master’s degree in 1985.

Other pieces about birds are also percolating in her mind, she said, all of which could ultimately coalesce into a theme for an album. But such thoughts are premature. Even as she hoped to have “The Great Potoo” in shape for this year’s Newport Jazz Festival, the band will continue to make up for lost time playing music from _Data Lords_.

Wherever her writing takes her, she said, she is happy with the direction of the group. “I have a new optimism that it somehow feels OK to enjoy where it’s going and not feel that’s wrong, too, because we’ve lost Frank. Frank would want that. That’s where we are. It’s a very good place to be — a very complex dynamic.”
The trajectory has been clear from her days as a teenage standout at the club Thelonious in her native Santiago, Chile, to her March debut as a leader at the Village Vanguard. That gig celebrated the release of her Blue Note debut, 12 Stars — and cemented a place in the jazz firmament that may have been, well, written in the stars.

A legendarily hard worker determined to wring the most out of her gift, Aldana has the fire within. She is more focused on the intoxication of creation than the roar of the crowd.

“When I play music, to me if there’s an audience or not, of course there’s a difference — but it’s not going to change the way I’m going to be into the music,” she said.

Like her lodestar Sonny Rollins, who inspired her to switch from alto to tenor at age 12, she has acquired a reputation for intense commitment to her instrument. On the road, her early morning long tones have been known, to the bemusement of her bandmates, to rouse hotel guests.

But for Aldana, that work is a means to an end. “As much as I can practice seven, eight hours a day, that is not a problem,” she said. “But when I’m playing, I want to be in the moment. If not, I’m not going to allow myself to grow and figure out what I have to say.”

Colleagues are some of her greatest admirers. Singer Cécile McLorin Salvant, who performed with Aldana in the estimable all-wom-
The votes are in, and the Ulysses Owens Jr. Big Band has been selected as Rising Star Large Ensemble of the Year in the 70th Annual DownBeat Critics Poll.

The honor comes on the heels of the band’s acclaimed performances at Dizzy’s Club pre-pandemic and a live debut record called Soul Conversations (Outside in Music, 2021). Celebration of the group has led Owens Jr. — a fiery and creative drummer known for his playing with the likes of Kurt Elling, Joey Alexander and Christian McBride — to focus energy on developing his 19-piece big band.

“I’ve been going back and forth between big band and [other styles] my whole career — I love the big band,” Owens said. “In my big band, there’s a freedom that I have to orchestrate and to play that’s very different than what I do with Kurt or McBride or Joey or whomever.”

Owens said the recognition has been especially affirming for him because the band has been well-received by new audiences, and because it is emblematic of a return to his early musical roots: playing drums in the Black Sanctified Church, devouring a favorite Buddy Rich video his parents gifted him and admiring his early teachers who were heavies in the world of big-band drumming, like Ricky Kirkland, who played with the Ray Charles Big Band.

Raised in Jacksonville, Florida, Owens’ exposure to the music scene began in the church where, as 7-year-old, he was appointed the drummer of the church choir. That role gave him his first glimpse into the responsibility of leading an ensemble from the drum throne.

As a high school freshman, Owens studied drums privately with Kirkland and was encouraged to audition for his school’s jazz band, beating out the presiding senior for the drum seat. By age 15, he dived headfirst into Jacksonville’s heavy jazz scene, nurtured by the proximity of University of North Florida, and began playing regularly with and around UNF folks like soulful Japanese pianist Takeshi Ohbayashi, Bahamian jazz trumpeter Giveton Gelin and Diego Rivera, who also arranges for the band, tenor saxophonist Alexa Tarantino, tenor saxophonist Michael Dease to approach Owens about putting his own big band together.

“He was like, ‘Ulysses ... there’s something about your playing that comes alive when you’re with a big band in a way that doesn’t come alive in other configurations,’” Owens recalled.

So, when Dizzy’s called and asked him to bring in a band, Owens went out on a limb and put together a big band crafted to be more diverse in age, gender and sexual orientation.

“We wanted to have women in the band,” Owens said. “I felt like everybody always talks about jazz and gender and justice. They talk about it, and they sit on the panels and their bands don’t change. I told them, I don’t want tokenism. We started looking for the baddest women on their instruments.”

The band is a melting pot — including alto player Alexa Tarantino, tenor saxophonist Diego Rivera, who also arranges for the band, tenor saxophonist Giveton Gelin and soulful Japanese pianist Takeshi Ohbayashi.

The lineup and the repertoire — comprising many arrangements and compositions by band members — turns heads. Along with performing some of Owens’ originals, like the gliding, tenor-led waltz “Red Chair,” the group does an inspired rendition of Michael Jackson’s “Human Nature” and a saucy cover of Neil Hefti’s “Girl Talk.”

Owens brings variety with intention.

“We need new generations of listeners, but also people who have not listened to this art form before,” he said. “One of the things I love about this is that I found people buying this big band record who had never bought a jazz record before, let alone a big band record.”

The band will be back at Dizzy’s from Nov. 29 through Dec. 4, then go into the studio.

“I think [big band jazz] can teach us what Dizzy Gillespie talked about, which is you should have one foot in the present, one foot in the past and one foot in the future,” Owens said. “I think my band echoes the past but also presses toward the future, which is what I think people need today.”
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Ambrose Akinmusire
TRUMPET
BM ’05

Regina Carter
VIOLIN
Jazz Arts Faculty

Ron Carter
BASS
MM ’61, HonDMA ’98,
Jazz Arts Faculty

Emmet Cohen
RISING STAR—PIANO
MM ’14

Miho Hazama
RISING STAR—ARRANGER
MM ’12

Joel Ross
VIBRAPHONE
Jazz Arts Faculty

JAZZ ARTS
it all happens here.

INGRID JENSEN
INTERIM DEAN

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Manhattan School of Music
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917-493-4436 admission@msmnyc.edu
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JAMES BRANDON LEWIS / RED LILY QUINTET

JESUS WAGON : ALBUM OF THE YEAR !

70th ANNUAL CRITICS POLL

James Brandon Lewis tenor saxophone, compositions
Kirk Knuffke cornet
William Parker bass, gimbri
Chris Hoffmann cello
Chad Taylor drums, mbira

Kirk Knuffke Trio
Gravity Without Airs 2LP / 2CD

Whit Dickey Quartet
Astral Long Form CD

Whit Dickey Trio
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Dickey-Parker-Shipp
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Tani Tabbal Trio
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— Willie Jones III, WJ3 Records

70TH ANNUAL CRITICS POLL RISING STAR PRODUCER
VOTE!

87th DownBeat Annual Readers Poll

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AUGUST 2022 DOWNBEAT 51
Nicole Johänntgen Blazes Trails for Female Improvisers

The multifaceted jazz saxophonist Nicole Johänntgen is a DIY dynamo with a remarkably prodigious career. Raised in Germany, she studied classical piano before switching to saxophone and self-releasing the first of her 20 albums at age 17.

Ten years later, while spontaneously improvising at a festival gig, she had an epiphany that transformed her path as an artist and inspired her to become a trailblazer for other women by founding Support of Female Improvising Artists in 2014.

“We started playing like we were in a trance, and I felt this magical force come over me,” Johänntgen recalled via Zoom from her longtime home in Zurich, where the fifth biennial SOFIA had just wrapped a five-day session of DIY music business workshops capped by live improvised performances. “When I woke up [from that trance], the people in the audience were all screaming like, ‘What is this fire?’ And from that time on, I had the fire in myself.”

Johänntgen’s two latest albums on her own Selmabird label showcase her versatile range as an improviser. Solo II, recorded at the top of Switzerland’s Gotthard Pass, is a meditative soundscape that echoes off the mountains, while Henry III evokes the funky second-line beats of New Orleans, where her band called Henry was born.

Equally adept as an organizer, Johänntgen upped the ante for this edition of SOFIA. Held in the spacious Zurich home of longtime music supporter Richi Irniger, 83, it drew artists from several countries and featured special sessions with the Ukrainian Youth Jazz Orchestra. Participants feasted on organic food and practiced yoga on the lawn before reassembling at night to perform for enthusiastic audiences around Zurich.

Johänntgen was on a creative roll when she spoke in a conversation punctuated by much laughter and a pop-in visit from her 2-year-old son, whose favorite instrument is the cello. He and her husband, Daniel Bernet, a magazine editor who shoots many of her promo photos, will accompany Johänntgen on some of her Solo II dates during a busy summer that includes a Henry tour and several masterclass workshops.

SOFIA looked amazing, judging from your photos and videos. But before we talk about that, let’s rewind to your two latest releases.

I recorded Solo II on a very important point in Switzerland at the top of Gotthard Pass, in this tiny, tiny chapel with the most amazing reverb.

That’s all natural, everything is acoustic, nothing is added to the recording. The older I get, the more I love to have a clean acoustic sound. I also want to play more in churches, because it attracts, like, normal people who never go to jazz concerts, who come up to me with tears in their eyes to tell me they loved it.
You really surprised me on the final track when you started singing, which was lovely. Have you done a lot of singing during your solo performances?

No. [laughs] No. Do you think I should go on singing?

Absolutely!

OK, I will write that on my wall like a mantra: more singing! A Swiss radio station offered to record me in September, which I want to do with tuba, conga, percussion and sousaphone. And maybe I could do what you said now: sing!

That lineup sounds a lot like your Henry band. And though you recorded Henry III with European musicians, the band was born in New Orleans, where you recorded your first album. What brought you here?

I got a scholarship that sent me to New York, and while I was there, I thought it would be nice to discover another city of jazz. I immediately saw New Orleans in my head, a city with music like fireworks. I didn't know any local players, but a friend of mine recommended some drummers and sousaphone and trombone players. We recorded the first time we met, in one room, where we played a tune three times: one for soundcheck, one for rehearsal, one for the recording. And there was pure, pure love, pure fireworks.

There was also a lot of love and fireworks at SOFIA. What inspired you to create that?

SOFIA is the little daughter of the Sisters in Jazz program in America, which had a big annual conference that stopped happening for a while. So I thought, OK, I want to do something for female musicians in Europe that also includes music business workshops. Because we need to survive after we come out of the university: How do we get gigs? There was a time you got discovered by a big label, but that time is over, and it's especially hard for women. Germany, a country of 80 million people, still has only two female jazz professors.

Sadly, that's not surprising. But SOFIA is helping to change that. What were some of this year's highlights?

The yoga, because the exercises were combined with awareness. How were you feeling before you went on stage? We had a very experienced drummer from Paris who gave us performance feedback. Like, go closer to the microphone and be more confident. That was very important because at the last gig, I was watching in the audience and said, “Hey, now you're talking!” [laughs] We also had two awesome improvising sessions with the Ukrainian Jazz Youth Orchestra.

Later, one of the young Ukrainian women who's in her early 20s took me aside and asked me privately: “Did you play when you were pregnant? How did you do it?” So I gave her some advice. Instead of two medium reeds, I used two soft reeds. And after six months, I stopped traveling abroad. I played little gigs in this country and recorded one CD when I was high, high pregnant. [laughs]

You've done some remarkable things without a label or a manager, and you have quite a heavy touring schedule. How do you pull that off?

I like to plan by myself, because my family can join me for some of the solo concerts, which are only 30 minutes. So this is good for family life. I’m not over exhausted. I still play and I love to play. It's a way of living the art: going on stage, where we have the magic in our hands. The whole jazz world is like a planet: the musicians, the concert organizers, the media people who help us find an audience. Because we need the audience to complete the circle.

Any advice for young women in jazz who are just starting out?

Be patient. If you work so hard that your ego takes over, it’s like sticking your finger in an electric socket. You are a human being. You need inspiration, and inspiration comes when you have a moment for yourself, not when you are under stress. So be patient. I’m 40, and I want to stand on stage for the next 40 years. —Cree McCree

NEW MUSIC FROM TORONTO, CANADA

The Next Step
A trio recording by bassist Roberto Occhipinti featuring Adrian Farrugia and Larnell Lewis.

And new releases by: Lorne Lofsky, Luis Deniz and ES:MO.

Canada FACTOR MODICA MUSIC www.modicamusic.com
In a thriving creative community, there are players who empower others for the greater good. For the jazz and Afro-Cuban music scene in Toronto, one of those individuals is Roberto Occhipinti.

In the first half of this year alone, the bassist/producer/arranger and his Modica Music label represented Toronto-based musicians by releasing the debut album by Cuban Canadian alto saxophonist Luis Deniz; classical bassist Joel Quarrington’s piano duo and bass quartet project; and The Next Step, Occhipinti’s own debut piano trio recording as a band leader. The story of how the native of Ontario’s capital city became an unplanned indie label head is as charmed as the man himself.

“I did my own recordings,” Occhipinti said in a Zoom interview from his home. “I had five. And then I started doing recordings for other people, like the pianist Hilario Durán. And then I just ended up becoming a de facto record producer.”

Presenting himself with what one might assume is a Canadian sense of modesty, he downplays what an invaluable one-stop shop he’s become. In addition to producing and releasing albums, he also plays on them and can arrange charts, too. Durán’s Juno-winning debut album, *New Danzón* (Alma Records, 2004) was supposed to feature John Patitucci and drummer Horacio “El Negro” Hernández. Patitucci was unavailable, so Occhipinti offered to do double duty as bassist and producer.

“When I produced records for people, they would say, ‘What about a label?’ And I’d tell them, ‘Well, you can be on my label. But I’ll tell you what my label will do for you — absolutely nothing,’” he recounted with a chuckle. “But I don’t take any money, either. So it just became sort of a clearinghouse.

“After releasing so many albums, I had to start acting like a record label,” he continued. “Meaning in Canada, we get support from an organization called FACTOR. The Foundation Assisting Canadian Talent on Recordings is ‘dedicated to providing assistance toward the growth and development of the Canadian music industry,’” according to the non-profit’s mission statement.

“So, I get FACTOR money, and now I have to do things like sign contracts and fill out studio logs,” he said. Within the past few years, Occhipinti has even been able to offer a space to record.

“I was working at a studio and, through a set of circumstances, I ended up buying the building,” he said. After moving his personal piano there, he started recording his own sessions. When the pandemic hit, he was able to offer a socially distant set-up. So musicians were calling him desperate to record, and play with others, he remembered.

Occhipinti sold the building, heeding the call of Toronto’s astonishing real estate market, and is in the process of relaunching in a new spot. He has around 10 unreleased sessions in the can from the previous space.

One project that stands out is by guitarist Lorne Lofsky, a Toronto music hero and veteran of groups led by Oscar Peterson and Chet Baker. He hadn’t released an album of his own in 25 years, so Occhipinti invited his old friend into the studio.

Lofsky released *This Song Is New* on Modica Music in April 2021. “It got all sorts of great press and some really nice reviews,” Occhipinti said. “And it’s got some life, still.”

“It’s great that Roberto’s getting these recordings of people like Lorne, who haven’t been recorded enough,” said soprano saxophonist and flutist Jane Bunnett, Occhipinti’s former bandleader. “They’re really high-quality recordings, and these independent labels are so important right now because there are all these great musicians out there but not enough support for them.”

Occhipinti was a studio musician in Toronto when Bunnett recruited him as a sub for her group. “Jane rescued me from that life, and I got to tour and connect with all these Cuban musicians through playing with her,” he reflected.

Splitting his interests between jazz and classical, Occhipinti had twin mentors, Quarrington, whose *The Music Of Don Thompson* was released by Modica in June, provided classical guidance that led to gigs with the Winnipeg Symphony, the Hamilton Philharmonic and the Canadian Orchestra Company, as well as a tour with modern composition titan Terry Riley. Dave Young, whose most recent set of albums Occhipinti produced, served a similar role on the jazz side.

Subsequent recording sessions with beloved Canadian singer-songwriter Bruce Cockburn and a tour with the cartoon alternative rock band Gorillaz were all Occhipinti.

“As soon as I got to Toronto in 2004, I started doing things with Roberto,” said Deniz. “I was only 21, and he gave me a lot of opportunities. And it’s not just music: He helped me get my mother out of Cuba. So he’s like a mentor, an uncle, a godfather and a friend.”

Released by Modica in late May, Deniz’s *El tinajón* features Occhipinti as a band member. “He’s someone who’s very, very valuable in a recording situation,” Deniz noted. “He’s also always very positive, and he wants to get things done the right way.”

On his in-studio manner, Occhipinti had a more humorous take. “I ended up becoming a record producer because I couldn’t keep my mouth shut on the sessions, anyway,” he quipped. “So people finally said, ‘OK, you produce it, then.’”

—Yoshi Kato
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INDIE ECLECTIC

As Ed Neumeister approaches his 70th birthday this September, he can look back on six decades of very diverse musical experiences.

If there was an award for jazz eclecticism over a career, he would be an odds-on favorite. According to Neumeister, that diversity was a key factor in his development as a first-call trombonist, as well as a critically acclaimed composer and arranger.

Growing up in the San Francisco Bay Area, Neumeister began playing trumpet at the age of 5. At 9, he switched to trombone. At 13, he performed J.J. Johnson's solo on "Mack The Knife" at the halftime show of an Oakland Raiders game.

He had a union card at 15, played gigs with rock groups and later worked as the music director for a band that backed stars like Chuck Berry and Chubby Checker. He studied classical trombone and composition at the University of California at San Jose.

After returning to the Bay Area from Paris in 1975, his approach to music continued to expand — he joined the Sacramento Symphony Orchestra, backing the likes of Frank Sinatra, Sarah Vaughan and Nancy Wilson and more. He also played with Grateful Dead guitarist Jerry Garcia in a short-lived project called Reconstruction.

"By then, I was in my late 20s, and I wanted to develop my own voice on my instrument," Neumeister said. "I consciously stopped listening to other trombone players."

"I started paying more attention to musicians like Coltrane, Miles, Herbie and Freddie Hubbard, and their approach to playing — as well as composition. In many ways, they became my primary influences."

Neumeister moved to New York and landed gigs with Lionel Hampton, Buddy Rich, the Duke Ellington Orchestra and Gerry Mulligan's Concert Jazz Band. Most importantly, he had an extended tenure with the Mel Lewis Orchestra, which evolved into the Vanguard Jazz Orchestra.

"I'd always been composing and arranging horn charts since my early days in rock bands," Neumeister said. "But it was really through my relationship with Bob Brookmeyer, the music director of Mel's band, that I seriously got into composing."

After teaching, playing and composing in Europe for almost 20 years, he returned to the U.S. in 2017, working on film scores and teaching around New York as he reestablished himself on the jazz scene.

He founded his own record label, MeisteroMusic, after facing difficulties dealing with major and independent record labels.

"One of my musical heroes, Anthony Braxton, had his own label," Neumeister said. "If you're doing music that's not pigeonholed and I'll call 'left of center,' it just makes more sense to keep control of your recordings."

The label has eight of Neumeister's albums as a leader — including his latest quartet release, What Have I Done? — as well as its first release by another musician: The Jazz Cave, featuring pianist Bevan Manson's trio.

After recording What Have I Done? in 2021, Neumeister's quartet finally played it live at Birdland on Memorial Day.

"We performed to an enthusiastic, packed house, and the quartet played magnificently," Neumeister said. "I was literally grinning ear to ear when I wasn't playing."

With live music and touring happening again, Neumeister is planning more quartet performances and a possible tour in the fall.

He's also performing with his new band, the Assemblage Jazz Orchestra. He described the ensemble as "a band that's as diverse as possible — male, female; black, white; old, young; straight, gay; everything — playing a wide scope of improvised music with no compromise on quality."

—Terry Perkins
Brad Felt utilized euphonium and tuba as lead instruments, extending modern jazz traditions. A veteran of two European tours with Howard Johnson’s Gravity, he shared the stage with Roy Brooks, James Carter, Gerald Cleaver, Frank Foster, Freddie Hubbard, Thad Jones, Dave Liebman, Lew Tabackin and Clark Terry. This collection of previously unreleased performances pairs Brad’s euphonium with the bass of John Dana (a veteran of bands led by Rashied Ali, Art Blakey and Roland Kirk) and celebrates the legacy of two late, great artists.

“Felt plays the euphonium with such a compelling combination of brains, facility and a command of contemporary post-bop that he makes you forget that his instrument is still a rarity in jazz. Few players handle the big horn with as much authority in this idiom.”

Mark Stryker, Detroit Free Press

“(Felt’s) fast-fingered post-bop solos are complex and well developed, characterized by a fanciful melodic sensibility.”

Piotr Michalowski, Southeast Michigan Jazz Association

“Brad Felt is a brass master”

Richard B. Kamins, Cadence Magazine

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A storm is brewing. The skies are darkening and there is a humid thickness in the air; the wind is eerily calm. Then a flash of light, silence and the tooth-rattling force of the thunderclap. Its sounds reverberate, coaxing the clouds to burst and release their sheets of rain. The storm has come.

For saxophonist Isaiah Collier and drummer Michael Shekwoaga Ode, this roiling chaos is their creative space. Within it they eke out the anticipation of coming cacophony, they explode forth like thunder and lightning, and finally rest within the quietude of survival.

Having first met during Collier’s audition for Oberlin College, the twentysomething pair have developed an improvisatory telepathy far beyond their years. On their debut album as a duo, *Beyond*, they channel the rhythmic fury of drum and saxophone pairings such as Kenny Garrett and Jeff “Tain” Watts and Albert Ayler and Sunny Murray.

Across its seven tracks, *Beyond* plays through a wide dynamic range while Collier and Ode take turns to battle each other for musical supremacy.

Opener “Introduction: Take Me Beyond” features the spoken-word poetry of Jimmy Chan, setting the anticipatory scene for the coming aural onslaught with a trance-like ambience. Collier’s keening saxophone then moves us into the body of the suite, charging over Ode’s rolling toms on “Suns Of Mercury (Storms Of Revelations)” before settling into an earthy swing on highlights “Confessions Of The Heart” and “The Vessel Speaks.”

Producer Sonny Daze takes expert control of the reverb throughout, often making Collier’s long lines sound electronically processed to wash over Ode’s cymbal work. Yet, it is in the acoustic rawness of this duo’s playing that their strengths lie.

Listening to *Beyond* can feel like a challenge owing to its intensity, but surrender to Collier and Ode’s musical flow and you will be taken by their forces of nature, at once elemental and emotive.

—Ammar Kalia

Beyond: Introduction: Take Me Beyond; Suns Of Mercury (Storms Of Revelations); Confessions Of The Heart; Bend Of The Universe (Trust With All Your Heart); The Vessel Speaks; Omniscient (Mycelium); Hymn: Love Beyond Compare. (61:39)

Personnel: Isaiah Collier, saxophones, world instruments; Michael Shekwoaga Ode, drums; Jimmy Chan, gong, singing bowls, world instruments, vocals (1).

Ordering info: division81records.bandcamp.com
Vadim Neselovskyi

Odesa: A Musical Walk Through A Legendary City
SUNNYSIDE
★★★★

This is almost critic-proof. Anyone who has an ounce of empathy for Ukrainians who were displaced, killed or who are still fighting for their country after Russia ignited an unprovoked war will undoubtedly project enormous sentiments onto Odesa, pianist Vadim Neselovskyi’s poignant musical portrait of his Ukrainian hometown. There’s the added emotional weight of the revenue generated from album sales and related concerts benefitting Ukrainian humanitarian efforts. How can you not root for this album?

That question hinges on whether one would shower praise on Odesa had Russia not invaded Ukraine. It’s important to note that album was recorded before Russia’s February 2022 invasion. Fortunately, Neselovskyi’s orchestral improvisations and evocative compositions lull on their own terms. His music leans more toward European classical music and Eastern European folkloric music than Black American-rooted jazz. Swing and swagger are of limited quantity. And if a blues sensibility is a necessity for a listener to consider it jazz, then the person will have to reexamine their definition of the idiom to determine whether Odesa is actually jazz.

Although I’ve yet to visit Ukraine, I get a sense of Neselovskyi’s keenness of evoking the soul of his people on the jittery “Jewish Dance,” which incorporates a lullaby that was sung by his maternal grandfather, and the haunting “Odesa 1941,” which captures the horror of Romanian troops, under Hitler’s command, persecuting Ukrainian Jews. —John Murph

Justice

The Vocal Works Of Oliver Lake
HIGH TWO
★★½

A tart, incisive voice on alto saxophone — whose extensive recording catalog includes appearances with Björk and Lou Reed, as well as some of wooliest free improvisation released in the past 45 years — Oliver Lake has never been reluctant to step outside what some may perceive as his wheelhouse.

Spoken word and other types of vocalization are forms of expression that have remained deep in Lake’s arsenal until his recent appearance with bassist Reggie Washington and DJ Grazzhoppa on Black Lives: From Generation To Generation, an album of contemporary protest music co-curated by Washington. Now, Lake has teamed with Philadelphia’s Sonic Liberation Front, led by percussionist Kevin Diehl, to realize a goal of creating an album of his vocal works.

Featuring a quartet of singers (Lake recites two poems, as well) in close harmony, Justice sometimes echoes the type of rhythmic bounce captured in Lake’s compositions for the World Saxophone Quartet. Although the choral voicings and Veronica Jurkiewicz’s charged violin sound focused and precise, rough edges abound elsewhere. The bass and drums on “Dedication” sound especially tentative, and the multifaceted “Clouds” lacks integration to the point where it seems more like a pastiche than a fully realized arrangement. A more gratifying issue is the sound mix, which favors the vocalists and Elliot Levin’s tenor saxophone. Like many projects realized during the COVID lockdowns, Justice was performed and recorded remotely, lending it a “field recording” feel.

—James Hale

Carol Sloane

Live At Birdland
CLUB44
★★★★

Live At Birdland blends upscale jazz-club intimacy with a mix of American songbook standards and distinctly neglected non-standards that have been Carol Sloan’s cup of tea since the start. She is joined by Scott Hamilton, whose Ben Webster-ish elegance along with pianist Mike Renzi reminds us of Sloan’s 1963 LP encounter with Webster himself.

Sloan has rarely looked to contemporary material, even in her early days when top writers were still on board. Now that she has lived long enough to see that unique class of professionalism largely deteriorate into an under-equipped laity of singer-songwriters, she is more comfortable than ever where she’s always been: the past.

Accordingly, her classicism is not for everybody. Sloan missed her chosen golden age by a generation. She’s become a student of a period she rooted herself in basics, avoiding retro caricature. She sings (and scats here and there) with a cool, contemporary sensibility while conveying the period ambiance of a song like “I Don’t Want To Walk Without You” strictly on its merits. Maybe this is why she has been held in higher esteem by her elite circle of peers than the public at large.

She closes with a 1990-ish Johnny Mandel obscurity called “I’ll Always Leave The Door A Little Open.”

—John McDonough
Beyond, I AM
Equal parts, cagey and cathartic, this sonic exorcism offers more ecstatic escapism than memorable melodic destinations. —John Murph

Faith is our irrational alter ego where we see the world we wish. So the fervor Collier pours on neither rescues us from its mayhem nor enlightens us to its meaning, which is his alone. Screams only to itself. —John McDonough

Gen Z’ers Collier and Ode throw a contemporary spin on ecstatic sax/drums duets. Seeking transcendence, the duo is best when deconstructing recognizable musical tropes like the frantic boogaloo on “Omniscient (Mycelium).” —James Hale

Vadim Neselovskyi, Odesa—A Musical Walk Through A Legendary City
Pianist Neselovskyi’s musical ode to his hometown is painfully prescient following the Russian invasion of the country. His solo compositions traverse everything from the tripping melodies of “Odesa Railway Station” to the emotive progression of “Jewish Dance.” A fitting, if somewhat sparse, tribute. —Ammar Kalia

Thematic coherence gives these well-dressed solo portraits of Odesa a formal sonata feel. The line between composition and improv, if any, is vague. Either way, compelling and inviting. —John McDonough

Darkly beautiful, Neselovskyi’s highly personal impressions of his hometown reflect his conservatory training but gain emotional clout when he allows more space to enter. —James Hale

Carol Sloane, Live At Birdland
Sloane’s voice is full of warmth and character on this live recording from 2019. There are moments where her timbre falters, but the sprightly backing from the late pianist Mike Renzi and saxophonist Scott Hamilton, as well as the metronomic stability of bassist Jay Leonhart, provide ample support, making this a pleasant, if not groundbreaking, listen. —Ammar Kalia

Fix a drink and picture yourself relaxing in Midtown Manhattan. With more than 70 years on stages like this, Sloane knows how to choose great material and embrace it with her aging voice. —James Hale

Sonic Liberation Front, Justice—The Vocal Works Of Oliver Lake
Saxophonist Lake is in fine form for this first collection of his vocal compositions in 50 years. While his arranged melodies are funky (“What”), forlorn (“Aztec”) and ethereal (“Clouds”), it is the work of the Sonic Liberation vocal quartet that shines, providing luscious stacks of harmony and dexterity to his songs of social urgency like “Justice.”

An intriguing if enlightening view of Oliver Lake’s spiky, earthy and exploration compositional voice through the lens of a vocal ensemble. —John Murph

Sweet Mancini-ish vocal blends interact with astringent violin and tongue-tied tenor interludes. A dry but ironic anxiety feels emotionally indecisive. The tension has periods of soft but unsettling uneasiness. —John McDonough

Critics’ Comments

Beyond, I AM
Ammar Kalia: ★★★★★ John Murph: ★★½ John McDonough: ★ James Hale: ★★★½

Vadim Neselovskyi, Odesa
Ammar Kalia: ★★★½ John Murph: ★★★ John McDonough: ★★★½

Carol Sloane, Live At Birdland
Ammar Kalia: ★★★½ John Murph: ★★★½ John McDonough: ★★★½ James Hale: ★★★

Sonic Liberation Front, Justice
Ammar Kalia: ★★★★★ John Murph: ★★★★★ John McDonough: ★★★★½ James Hale: ★★★★
Billy Mohler

**Anatomy**

CONTAGIOUS ★★★★

Aside from his early jazz education at Berklee College of Music, most of bassist and Laguna Beach native Billy Mohler’s life and livelihood has occurred in California, where he has had a successful career as a producer, songwriter and multi-instrumentalist. After his first jazz album, *Focus* (Make Records), was released to universal well-regard in 2019, it was only natural for this Grammy-nominated Hollywood denizen to immediately begin planning for the sequel. *Anatomy* delivers in that aspect, bringing back the entire cast — tenor saxophonist Chris Speed, trumpeter Shane Endsley and drummer Nate Wood — in an encore performance of what worked so well the first time.

Mohler’s instincts and experience in rock and pop translate well to writing original jazz music that, despite the seriousness and sincerity of the craft, manages to remain engaging and — yes — fun.

This stems from the bottom-up with infectious bass ostinato grooves that sync with angular, mostly unison lead lines from the horns.

“Nightfall” utilizes a clever clave in 13, horns along with the bass before moving into counterpoint against it. “Exit” introduces a forlorn, atonal melody over a primal three-note bass figure, featuring a flighty solo by Speed, followed by Endsley, who is enhanced with added spontaneous echo effects from producer Daniel Seef. “Speed Kills” is one of two loping modal swing tunes à la late Coltrane, the open two-feel allowing for plenty of free-range exploration by Endsley and Speed, who are both in top form throughout, their solos intricate, expressive and surprising. — *Gary Fukushima*

**Francisco Mela/ Shinya Lin**

**Motions Vol. 1**

577 RECORDS ★★★★

An extended improvisation in two parts, *Motions Vol. 1* showcases drummer Francisco Mela’s dynamic movements and young up-and-coming pianist Shinya Lin’s cerebral yet richly textured lines. There’s no doubt Lin was influenced by Mela well before the two even stepped into the studio to record this album. Lin recently graduated from Berklee, where Mela, a mainstay on the Boston jazz scene, currently teaches. In this debut collaboration, Mela and Lin are equally matched and both visionary in their own right.

Mela’s charismatic and uninhibited drums complement Lin’s introspective approach to piano and prepared piano. As a result, the duo’s collaboration is expansive and cinematic in scope. “Part I” begins like a noir film, with dark, languorous beats, industrial sounds on prepared piano and dramatic, punctuated piano notes. Lin’s improvisational style is analytical yet unrestrained. He moves deftly between organic melodies and experimental tone poems, while Mela’s feverish drums give way to sheets of sound and frenetic pulses. Just as they approach entropy, they come to a halt, taking a collective breath before Mela’s guttural vocal calls on them to reset and reopen on a more focused and angular improvisation.

The range of textures and motifs that Mela and Lin explore in “Part II” is even more diverse. It gradually advances to more muscular uptempo percussion and angular melodies. — *Ivana Ng*

**Yelena Eckemoff**

*I Am A Stranger In This World*

L&H PRODUCTION ★★★★

Yelena Eckemoff, born in Russia and based in North Carolina, converted to Christianity while still living in Moscow. She has long been interested in setting verses from the Bible’s Book of Psalms to music, composing jazz originals that in some cases are word-for-word musical recreations. In 2018, she recorded many of these compositions on *Better Than Gold In Silver*, a set that contained both vocal pieces and instrumentals.

The two-CD *I Am A Stranger In This World*, which is strictly instrumental, includes three selections that were left off of the earlier set due to lack of space: the title cut, “Like Rain Upon The Mown Grass” and “Every Beast Of The Field.” Those performances team the pianist-composer with trumpeter Ralph Alessi, violinist Christian Howes, guitarist Ben Monder, bassist Drew Gress and drummer Joey Baron. The other six numbers were recorded at the height of the pandemic in December 2020 and have Eckemoff joined by Alessi, Gress, guitarist Adam Rogers and drummer Nasheet Waits.

Eckemoff’s originals are full of rich themes and, because these are instrumental, one does not have to be religious at all to enjoy the music. The melodies often reflect her classical training, the explorations are inventive (particularly those of Alessi), and the interplay between trumpet, guitar and piano often blurs the lines between solos and ensembles, composition and improvisation.

— *Scott Yanow*
Kirk Knuffke Trio
Gravity Without Airs
TAO FORMS ★★★★½
Editing the cerebral explorations of Gravity Without Airs must have been challenging for cornetist Kirk Knuffke, bassist Michael Bisio and Matthew Shipp, the pianist who gives this drumless trio its gravity. Rewarding, too: This hour-and-a-half from the Kirk Knuffke Trio bristles with originality and daring. These works, seven on each of two disks, burst with fresh notions of musical collaboration, from the playfulness of “Time Is Another River” to “Blinds,” a mercurial track Knuffke launches birdlike, Shipp placating, Bisio muttering below. The journey begins with the title track. Knuffke enters breathily, slowly brightening against Shipp’s blocky playing and Bisio’s careful bass. Shipp and Bisio weave a quarter of the tune in, Shipp releasing a solo of commanding touch. Knuffke returns, sparely yet declaratively, Bisio and Shipp protecting him in this tune of whirls and eddies. It is improvisatory in the best sense, never disclosing all at once, always promising and exciting. Knuffke and the increasingly percussive Shipp become explosive, Bisio struggling to keep them in check. The escalating drama draws one in as these musical sages advance and retreat, upping the intensity. “June Stretched” may be the highlight of the second disk. It starts with a Bisio-Shipp duet that builds a platform for Knuffke. He and Shipp circle each other, ultimately going down different, improbably intersecting paths. The dynamics are motile, the trajectory of the tune steady if unpredictable. “Today For Today” ends this triumphant, modern jazz collection on a spare, warm note. It’s a beautiful tune that feels like a benediction. Don’t miss Francis Davis’ spirited liner notes.
—Carlo Wolff
Gravity Without Airs: [CD 1] Gravity Without Airs; Stars Go Up; Between Today and May; The Sun Is Always Shining; Birds of Passage; Time Is Another River; Paint Pale Silver; [CD 2] The Water Will Win; June Stretched; Blinds; Piece Of Sky; Shadows To Dance; Heal The Roses; Today For Today. (44:16/44:05)
Personnel: Michael Bisio, bass; Kirk Knuffke, cornet; Matthew Shipp, piano.
Ordering info: taoforms.bandcamp.com

Theo Croker
Live In Paris
SONY MASTERWORKS ★★★
As he has progressed in his career, trumpeter Theo Croker has become a maker of vibes just as much as he is a maker of music. This is certainly the case in the quick three-song live studio EP session recorded at the Deezer HQ in Paris while he was touring the BLK2LIFE || A Future Past material. This session captured where Croker was melding hip-hop into jazz for what is now a standard undertaking in Black American music, while still maintaining those identifiably clear ingredients in the stew.
Opener “Where Will You Go” settles into the soul just as much as it haunts with Croker’s vocals. Nothing creates a vibe like jamming out to Mos Def’s “UMI Says,” with Michael King taking moments throughout that are as lush as the perfect rug that brings the room together. Bassist Eric Wheeler and drummer Michael Shekwoaga Ode complete this picture with the ability to dazzle as individuals while meshing seamlessly as a unit. This is no better displayed than in their take on the closer “Fair Trade,” the Drake tune, where the group exists brightly while fading into the fabric as the necessary parts that make the piece whole, that keep it together. It’s a good enough to exist as its own thing until Croker’s next album comes along later this year.
—Anthony Dean-Harris

Stan Killian
Brooklyn Calling
SUNNYSIDE ★★★
Tough Texas tenor turned New Yorker Stan Killian, a regular at Greenwich Village’s late and lamented 55 Bar and host of a popular Queens jam session, salutes his post-COVID homecoming on his fourth album for Sunnyside, which adds the jazz-rock flavor of atmospheric guitarist Paul Bollenback to longtime bandmates Corcoran Holt bass and McClenty Hunter drums. The album showcases seven complex woven originals in a variety of feels, with Killian’s fetchingly robust, throaty sound and logical lines front and center. Soloists excel, but the accent is on interplay, with Hunter’s diffuse drumming recalling former Killian sideman Antonio Sánchez, and Holt offering engaging vamps and counterpoint. Justly known as a soulful swinger, Killian doesn’t disappoint with the cheerful lope of the opening tune, “Horizon,” which conjures the shimmering feel of staring out to sea before fluid tenor and guitar solos. The band swings easily in and out of 5/4 on “Holocence,” with sparky chorus trades and Holt walks fast under the excellent “Buyback,” with Killian alternating between biting staccato and legato flow.
—Paul de Barros
Brooklyn Calling: Horizons; Holocence; Buyback; Shibuya Crossing; Concept Of Peace; Brooklyn Calling: Open Doors. (53:22)
Personnel: Stan Killian, tenor saxophone; Paul Bollenback, guitar; Corcoran Holt, bass; McClenty Hunter, drums.
Ordering info: sunnysiderecords.com

Personnel: Theo Croker, trumpet, vocals; Michael King, keyboards; Michael Shekwoaga Ode, drums; Eric Wheeler, bass; D’leau, background vocals (2).
Ordering info: sonymusicmasterworks.com
Ray Charles was soaring in 1972. His voice had taken on a new force that came with maturity. In the 20 years since his recording debut, he had become a beloved global star. No idiom seemed beyond his grasp — whether he wanted to delve into jazz, country, gospel or the R&B that he built. Also an entrepreneur, Charles’ own Tangerine record company was also releasing his singles and albums along with those from his colleagues. Two releases from the Tangerine archives highlight how he was setting the pace in the early 1970s.

*Live In Stockholm 1972* (Tangerine; 39:00 ★★★★★) was originally issued as part of the 2021 six-disc box set *True Genius: The Ultimate Ray Charles Collection*. As one of the few documents of live Charles from this period, this LP offers copious insights into his development.

Charles retained some of what always worked onstage as he dug into his own song-development. The few documents of live Charles from this period, his delivery and the tail end of the hippie era.

During these two dates he kept some distinctive live moves — such as a Chopin-inspired piano interlude before launching into “I’ve Got A Woman.” But in Stockholm he turned its key riff into a more elongated incantation and extended improvisation. He stretched out “What’d I Say,” emphasizing a churning jazz organ groove along with sensuality in his back and forth with the Raelettes.

Each Raelette also had a spotlight turn on their feisty version of Joe South’s “Games People Play.” Meanwhile, Charles still knew everything about the power of restraint and when to shout. When he holds back on “Don’t Change On Me” and “I Can’t Stop Loving You” his phrasing conveyed a quiet magic.

Even with the changes in music and society throughout the decades, his delivery and the orchestra’s vivacious swing wound up making Irving Berlin’s Tin Pan Alley chestnut “Alexander’s Ragtime Band” sound current even at the tail end of the hippie era.

But the most telling exchanges came during Charles’ commanding version of the 1940s standard “I’ve Had My Fun.” His way of alternating single note piano lines with gradually rolling chords continue to show that his instrumental prowess equaled his singing voice. All of which built up to that tension and release Charles had perfected. Then he expounded and repeated the line, “That’s the blues!” Nobody in his Swedish audience would have doubted that.

Back in the United States, the country was enduring the impact of its ongoing war in Vietnam, urban riots and other fissures. Charles responded with *A Message From The People* (Tangerine; 39:00 ★★★★★), a large-ensemble concept album that addressed the nation’s troubles alongside deep love for his homeland. His statement remains relevant 50 years later.

To deliver that message, Charles brought in some longtime friends who also kept their ears attuned to different contemporary sounds, primarily arranger Quincy Jones. Throughout the album, this crew tied together its array of idioms and perspectives with Charles’ unmistakable voice being the strongest bond. Looking at the state of the nation — and perhaps the crossover success of such church-based activist groups as The Staple Singers — he provides bold takes on the African American anthem “Lift Every Voice And Sing” and the modern blues lament “Seems Like I Gotta Do Wrong.”

Charles focuses on funk in his protest statement “Hey Mister” while maybe challenging his disciple Stevie Wonder on “Heaven Help Us All.” Through each step of the way, Jones and his orchestra match Charles’ assertiveness while such session veterans as bassist Chuck Rainey expertly ascend and descend with his voice.

Somewhat surprisingly, Charles’ definitive take on “America The Beautiful” was not widely heralded at the time. Possibly the nation’s notion was not ready for the deep inflections he brought to this panacea or his sensibility didn’t capture the national mood. But eventually many more came to recognize that his voice is what the United States should be all about.

**Todd Marcus Jazz Orchestra**

*In The Valley* (Stricker Street)

Bass clarinetist Todd Marcus explores his Egyptian heritage during most of the selections on *In The Valley*, recorded in June 2019. His late father was Egyptian and, as a child, Marcus visited Egypt several times. He returned in more recent times to visit family and in 2015 and 2018, when he performed some of his originals from his previous album, *Blues For Tahrir*, during tours.

On *In The Valley*, Marcus contributed all five compositions, four of which blend together Egyptian scales and melodies with Western harmonies and jazz improvising. He utilizes a six-horn neton for this difficult but successful task.

After pianist Xavier Davis plays a brief introduction, “Horus” (named after an ancient Egyptian deity) sets the standard for the program. The ensemble plays some fast lines that sound very Middle Eastern, Marcus creates a fiery bass clarinet solo and Alex Norris contributes some fluent trumpet over the swinging rhythm section.

Drum breaks, a brief tradeoff of the horns and the return of the speedy theme conclude the piece. “The Hive,” a tribute to modern-day Cairo, is most notable for trombonist Alan Ferber’s solo, which becomes increasingly more passionate the longer he plays.

The most colorful and accessible piece is “Cairo Street Ride,” which depicts the somewhat chaotic but ultimately logical traffic of Cairo. “Final Days,” which was written a few months after Marcus’ father’s death, is quietly emotional and somber.

—Scott Yanow

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—Scott Yanow
The album title itself is an invitation into the sound world of two seasoned improvisers, soprano sax explorer Jane Ira Bloom and her longtime collaborator, bassist Mark Helias. Together they take the listener on a journey that travels from sublime intimacy to jaunty swing, mesmerizing soundscapes and edgy avant garde extrapolations. A purely improvised session in the studio, these pieces have the aura of spontaneous composition, a testament to the duo’s innate telepathy.

The gently melodic title track opens the collection on a sparse rubato note, recalling the intimate encounters between Ornette Coleman and Charlie Haden on 1979’s Soapsuds Soapsuds. Helias puts some bounce in his boldly resonant walking lines on the upbeat “Cut To The Chase.” His bowed overtones and harmonics blend beautifully with Bloom’s soprano on the adventurous “Laser Plane,” and his aggressive arco work creates a hypnotic effect on “Imaginary Fences.”

The two engage in some playful call-and-response on “Detectives” and also on the driving swinger “Hard Science,” then space becomes their partner on the meditative “As Close As It Gets.” Perhaps their most engaging encounter happens on the winsome “Folks Sing,” which finds Bloom soaring on soprano. “Hold The Wire” and “Quelle” both represent edgy detours into skronkville, while closer “Second Hand Lonely” is a return to hushed elegance.

Recorded over several months in 2021–’22, See Our Way is a followup to their first release as a duo, 2021’s Some Kind Of Tomorrow. And this time, they go even deeper. —Bill Milkowski

Personnel:

Jane Ira Bloom, soprano saxophone; Mark Helias, bass.

Ordering info:
markhelias.bandcamp.com

Steven Feifke

The Role Of The Rhythm Section

LA RESERVE

Steven Feifke is pretty darn good at the piano and arranging (particularly with his big band), and he thinks Dan Chmielinski and Bryan Carter are pretty darn good at the bass and drums, respectively. So, he’s made a piano-bass-drums album of seven standards and one original composition (the penultimate tune, “Sunrise In Harlem”) to show just how much he appreciates them. And for yet another of this sort of “hearkening the classics” album, it’s also pretty darn good.

His solo approach to “Tea For Two” is playful and concise; at moments, he laughs like he’s marveling at how it’s coming out of his fingers.

Its transition into the Thelonious Monk tune “I Mean You” with the rest of the trio is a perfect fit, like a drop-in that the band would take advantage of as a break during the live set. He plays this same trick with his own composition, “Sunrise In Harlem” — a sweet, contemplative piece that’s easy to get lost in — before ending the album with a rousing take on Romberg and Hammerstein’s “Softly, As In A Morning Sunrise.”

For this trio, which functions as the core of Feifke’s big band, highlighting these standards is a literal communication of the role of the rhythm section. Using these pieces as examples of these players is an argument for their particular prowess as much as it is about their overall function.

—Anthony Dean-Harris

Personnel:

Steven Feifke, piano; Dan Chmielinski, bass; Bryan Carter, drums.

Ordering info:
lareserverecords.com
Idiosyncratic Musical Visions

The originating impulse of spontaneity has never been exclusive to jazz, but has often served as a bridge between it and other forms of music. These five recordings walk that span in order to express idiosyncratic musical visions.

The trio Bloodmist convened late in 2020 at Brooklyn’s Pioneer Works, a former iron-works, to record Arc (5049 Records; 56:07 ★★★★½). This is the ensemble’s third album, and practice has perfected the beyond-bleak darkness of their ambience. The space’s resounding sounds amplify the bring-out-the-dead vibe of the bass guitarist’s stark cadences. The flickering emanations from Mario Díaz de León’s synthesizer and drum machines seem to leap from one boom to the next. Effects similarly magnify the frequency range of Jeremiah Cyramer’s clarinet, which swings like a hyper-luminous scythe through the music’s vastness. One caveat: You’ll need speakers with a robust bass response to get all that this album has to offer.

Ordering info: 5049records.com

Terry Jennings (1940–’81) first played Piece For Cello And Saxophone (Saltern; 1:24:38 ★★★½) in December 1960, when composer La Monte Young invited him to open a concert series at Yoko Ono’s loft. Jennings hoped to play the piece with Scott LaFaro, but the bassist couldn’t make the gig. A three-minute fragment that he recorded four years later with cellist Charlotte Moorman sounds like a missing link between modal jazz and minimalism, with Jennings’ incantory alto saxophone phrases gracefully suspended over a static string drone, but Young heard something more in the piece. Three decades later, he transposed its tuning from equal temperament to just intonation, turning it into something like an extended alap for a raga. He performed during the 1980s and 1990s as a duet for his voice and Charles Curtis’ cello. This recording by Curtis, only the second solo performance in which her approach between alternates long tones interspersed with silence, and briefer, intricate explorations of line using an instrumental voices that range from barely audible exhalations to raw, coarse-grained cries.

Ordering info: relativepitchrecords.bandcamp.com

The Swedish saxophonist Martin Küchen plays five different horns in diverse settings, including the Mingus-like large band Angles9, the free-jazz Trespass Trio and sparse meta-improvisation with Keith Rowe. Utopia (Thanatosis; 51:51 ★★★) is an excellent example of his approach to solo performance, which uses accessories that fill out the sound and enhance the music’s emotional impact. Radio broadcasts of choral music and a female soprano singer amplify the anguished quality of his deliberately paced, melodically focused performances on alto and tenor saxophone.

Ordering info: thanatosis.org

In 2021, the Yellow Barn Music Festival in Putney, Vermont, commissioned tenor saxophonist Travis Laplante to compose a response to Miles Davis’ On The Comer and the knowledge that he was listening to the music of Karlheinz Stockhausen when he made it. Laplante used process rather than sound to focus on the act of transmission. He met personally with the eight chamber musicians who would accompany him in concert, so that he could write for their personalities as well as their instruments. The sumptuous acoustic string voices, rich brass harmonies and rainbow percussion heard on the ecstatic Wild Tapestry (Out of Your Heads; 30:40 ★★★★) uses imploring melody and building tension to reach a state of ecstatic communion that sounds nothing like On The Comer’s baleful, looping funk, but places a similar emphasis on tonal color. Laplante, for whom music-making is an intimate, shared process, has once more found a way to share his reflections on the mystery of communication.

Ordering info: outofyourheadrecords.com

Solo saxophonist Masayo Koketsu has performed widely in Japan and Europe, but Fuklya (Relative Pitch; 46:32 ★★★½) is her first American release. While Koketsu credits Charlie Parker as an early inspiration, her work here lies closer to Mats Gustafsson or Peter Brötzmann. Like them, Koketsu is an expressionist player who treats her horn’s limits as opportunities. This album, whose name translates as Blowgun, comprises a complete
Mark Winkler
Late Bloomin’ Jazzman
CAFÉ PACIFIC
★★★★

Mark Winkler is an unsung hero of West Coast jazz. The singer and lyricist has been quietly churning out idiosyncratic hipster songs with a slightly retro feel for years. His 20th album, Late Bloomin’ Jazzman, may just be his best.

It may also be his most personal. His crafty lyrics reflect on age (the title cut, “Old Enough”), human frailty (“Marlena’s Memories”), love and loss (“In Another Way,” “Before You Leave”), and the power of art to transcend time (“Bossa Nova Days” and “If Gershwin Had Lived”).

When he’s not singing his own compositions, co-written with a stable of talented composers, he chooses excellent covers by composers from the Gershwins to Michael Franks, to Burton Lane and Yip Harburg, to Shelly Berg and Lorraine Feather. He also has the smarts to surround himself with such first-class L.A. musicians as John Clayton, David Benoit, Bob Sheppard and Jamieson Trotter. As a result, lovely arrangements and tasty soloing abound.

As a singer, Winkler is a storyteller, an avuncular presence who imparts a hard-earned wisdom: “I’m old enough/ Not to be fooled by the lights and the show/ But I’m young enough/ To know I don’t know all that much, don’t you know.”

Throughout this fine set, his voice is wry, unpretentious and warm. In short, he is a mensch — and splendid company.

—Allen Morrison

Watch The Sun
PJ Morton
MORTON/EMPIRE
★★★★½

Armed with magic and mastery, PJ Morton has fashioned a collection of tracks for our time that is forward-leaning while still capturing the Cognac-richness of crème de la crème of vintage soul music. A child of two New Orleans ministers, Morton’s career began in the church, and though his songs are primarily secular in nature now, Watch The Sun is bursting with evidence of PJ’s continued ministry: delivering messages rooted in positivity and perseverance on tracks like the gospel cut “The Better Benediction.” The singer also implores listeners with the Buddhism truism popularized by Bruce Lee to be “Like Water” (on the track of the same name) in the face of adversity.

On Watch The Sun, PJ assembles a veritable who’s who of featured artists (both young and seasoned) including Jill Scott, the incomparable Stevie Wonder (whose profound influence runs deep through Morton’s work), El DeBarge, Jojo and Alex Isley, all to great effect. Scott’s restless spoken-word exhortation at the top of “Still Believe” perfectly complements Isley’s wistful refrain. “So Lonely,” which successfully melds the schoolyard chant of “rain, rain go away” with a laidback second line-ready habanero groove proves to be the perfect centerpiece for D.C.-bred rapper Wale’s outstanding bars. “On My Way” features El DeBarge, who delivers a stunning take alongside Morton.

This album highlights the fact that while PJ is a virtuosic songwriter and vocalist, he’s also a sensational producer who knows how best to showcase the talent of others. PJ Morton is particularly well-suited to make music engineered to be a balm for the mind, heart and spirit.

—Ayana Contreras

Spanish Harlem Orchestra
Imágenes Latinas
OVATION
★★★★

Any album dedicated in part to the late Gonzalez brothers — Andy, whose bass lines bounced with a deep Latin flavor, and his brother, Jerry, a trumpeter and percussionist with flair — has a gold standard to achieve, and Imágenes Latinas by the Spanish Harlem Orchestra accomplishes this and muy mas. Each one of the 11 tracks is infused with lively toe-tapping, thigh-slapping tempos that require a highly disciplined urge not to leap from your seat and throw down a few private steps of salsa, mambo or cha-cha. “Llego La Hispanica,” composed and arranged by pianist Oscar Hernandez (also the album’s producer) is a feverish example of the ensemble’s way of conjuring the Gonzalez beat, and this becomes all the more apparent on “Mambo 2021,” where Jeremy Bosch’s flute blends wonderfully and alternately with Mitch Frohman’s baritone saxophone licks. The trumpets of Alex Norris and Manuel “Maneco” Ruiz contribute brilliant, sizzling interludes that push the song to another level of intensity. And then Hernandez’s piano solo tastefully augments a track that is brimming with images of a summer stroll through East Harlem. “Como Te Amo” slows things down, and the vocalization here, rendered by Marco Bermudez, Carlos Cascante and Bosch is as harmonically tight as the instruments.

—Herb Boyd

Watch The Sun:
Love’s Disease (Just Can’t Get Enough); Biggest Mistake; Please Don’t Walk Away; Watch The Sun; My Peace by PJ Morton & JoJo; Be Like Water; So Lonely; Still Believe; LT Too Heavy; On My Way; The Better Benediction. (37:40)

Personnel: PJ Morton with numerous featured artists.

Ordering info: store.empi-re.com
Anthony Wilson
The Plan Of Paris
GOAT HILL
★★★★

The title track of Anthony Wilson’s 13th solo album is exceptional. Not only will it encourage Paris lovers to experience that magical city again and again, it is a sharply written mini-memoir of a vexing love affair. Old-fashioned in its verbal craftsmanship, this romantic, mesmerizing tune should become a standard.

The first five tracks of the alternately satisfying and maddening The Plan Of Paris (a digital-only release) are vocals showcasing guitarist/vocalist Wilson’s easygoing delivery and Gerald Clayton’s subtle keyboards. The last three are instrumentals stressing the expertise of Wilson’s band. There’s no doubt Wilson is a pro — he’s been Diana Krall’s guitarist for more than 20 years — and the instrumentals are flawless and pleasant. But they don’t deliver on the promise of the vocal numbers.

What starts as a kind of concept album about love and loss — Van Morrison’s Astral Weeks comes to mind — reduces to technical expert, pleasant instrumentals. Still, there are satisfactions, and Wilson’s versatility, and his willingness to transcend category, give the album unusual, if not fully realized, personality.

Other highlights: “A Postmaster’s Daughter,” a vocal that shifts the scene from Paris to rural New England, is a Southern Gothic tune about divorce. The guitars are beautiful, Byrds-like. Wilson doesn’t want to let this tune go. The first instrumental, “Noontide,” showcases the empathy between Clayton and Wilson. Whether it arrives at a destination is less important than the mood it creates.

—Carlo Wolff

Keith Hall
Made In Kalamazoo
ZOOM OUT
★★★★½

This is a carefully structured project built around a clear and focused vision. Drummer Keith Hall offers solo tribute to three legendary drummers — Billy Hart, Elvin Jones, and Max Roach — at the beginning, middle and end of this 20-track album. Those border seven compositions played by a trio featuring Andrew Rathbun on reeds and Robert Hurst II on bass, and 10 reeds-drums duos in a more avant-garde style. Many of the trio pieces have a churning, heavy-footed groove thanks to Hurst’s booming bass, and Rathbun’s melodies (which are often more like riffs) and solos are reminiscent of JD Allen’s work with his trio featuring Gregg August and Rudy Royston.

On “Boiling Pot,” he overdubs short bass clarinet phrases behind his tenor saxophone; you almost don’t notice them at first, but they become crucial by the end. On “Coming Of Age,” he switches to soprano and the rhythm section creates a kind of meditative rubato backing. As the piece winds down, Hall sweeps it away with washes of cymbals. The duos are significantly more abstract and experimental than the trio pieces; Rathbun pushes his horns through echo and reverb on “Mop It Up,” and makes it sound like a vintage analog synthesizer from Stevie Wonder’s arsenal on “Get Up Get Out,” while Hall lays down driving beats. “Dream Sequence” is even weirder; Hall keeps his cymbals dancing and his snare work martial, as Rathbun journeys through deep space.

—Philip Freeman

Oded Tzur
Isabela
ECM
★★★★

The Indian classical raga form is one with blurred edges; its soft melodies fade in and out of focus, ultimately cohering to weave a tapestry of enveloping sound that can feel like it will never end, like light breaking at dawn.

Saxophonist Oded Tzur has become an expert in blending the improvisatory jazz tradition with the raga and its ever-expanding presence. Training with Bansuri master Hariprasad Chaurasia, Israeli-American Tzur has developed a unique style on his tenor, a softly undulating tone that mirrors the piping of Indian flutes, while containing an earthy, reed-driven power ready to be unleashed at key moments.

Tzur’s second release on ECM, Isabela, is the most fully realized iteration of his North Indian-inspired jazz compositions. A suite of five tracks, the album opens with an ambient, unmetered “Invocation,” in the tradition of the raga alap, before undertaking its own dynamic arc — from the pensive, gossamer melodies of “Noam” through to the rhythmic piano of “The Lion Turtle” and ending on the percussive explosion of “Love Song For The Rainy Season.”

In gradually building the range of his intensity, Tzur and his band take the listener on an emotive journey. There is the romantic longing of the title track, featuring a deft interplay between Tzur and pianist Nitai Hershkovitz’s voicings, the forlorn longing of “Noam,” given grounding by bassist Petros Klampanis, and finally the full band bombast of the closing track. Here, drummer Jonathan Blake expertly pushes his rhythms until the entire quartet is cooking, while Tzur blows forcefully to contain us within his intensity. In that sound, dawn moves into day and bright, blinding sunlight.

—Ammar Kalia

Made In Kalamazoo:
Be Curious (For Billy Hart); Douglass King Obama: Kxox Brew; The Promise; Boiling Pot; Coming Of Age; Creative Force; Well Of Hope; Interlude; Map II Up; Sweep; Get Up Get Out; Dream Sequence; Sympathetic Vibrations; Lakeside; My Man; What You Say; Young Man’s Game; Landscape; Thank You; Max. (66:53)

Personnel: Andrew Rathbun, tenor and soprano saxophones, bass clarinet, electronics; Robert Hurst II, bass; Keith Hall, drums.

Ordering info: keithhall.bandcamp.com

Isabela:
Invocation; Noam; The Lion Turtle; Isabela; Love Song For The Rainy Season. (35:27)

Personnel: Oded Tzur, tenor saxophone; Petros Klampanis, bass; Nitai Hershkovitz, piano; Johnathan Blake, drums.

Ordering info: ecmrecords.com
Jon Balke Siwan
Hafla
ECM ★★★½

As a fitting opening concert at this spring’s Vossa Jazz festival in Norway, frequent Voss visitor Jon Balke was back in town, and enmeshed in one of his worldly conceptual projects. The Arabic-geared band Siwan, which Balke founded in 2007 and to which he has returned with the fascinating album Hafla this year, landed with a dramatic impact in concert.

With its innovative, cohesive mesh of ensemble parts — sinuous strings by the group Barokksolistene, multi-ethnic percussion (headed by the unique and ever-sensitive Helge Norbakken), charismatic Algerian vocalist Mona Boutchebak and Balke’s tasteful keyboards — the sum effect conjured up an entrancing pan-ethnic tapestry on stage. The magic also translates beautifully to the pristine recorded artifact on ECM Records, although recorded in Copenhagen via delayed, distanced stages and logistics vis-a-vis COVID challenges. Based on texts by 11th century poets Wallada bint al-Mustakfi and al-Andalusian poet Ibn Zaydun, Balke’s new music pays homage to multiple muses and historical and cultural contexts, to rich ends.

Vocalist Boutchebak is consistently mesmerizing and was central in the formative conceptual stages of the project: She wrote the yearning love ballad “Mirada Furtiva” (key line: “I save for you all my longing”). After the wending, interlinked trek of 12 pieces, with propulsive unison string lines and solo turns by Iranian kemençe player Derya Turkan and the percussive elegance of Pedram Khavar Zamini’s tombak, the set closes on the compact, bittersweet “Is There No Way.” Here, vocalist Per Buhe lends the male voice in the suite’s love saga angle.

—Josef Woodard

Hafla: Tarroqba; Enamorado de Júpiter; Mirada Furtiva; La Estrella Fugaz; Arrihu Aqwadu; Ma Yakunu Li-Annaha; Diálogo en la Noche; Línea Oscura; Saeta; Uquállibu; Visita; Is There No Way. (45:20)

Personnel: Mona Bouthchekab, vocals; Itxoxa; Derya Turkcan, kemençe; Bjarte Eike, baroque violin; Helge Norbakken, percussion; Pedram Khavar Zamini, tombak; Per Buhe, vocals, viola, Jon Balke, keyboards, electronics, tombak; Barokksolistene: Peter Spisky, Louise Gorm, Anesma Asghodorn, violins; Torbjörn Köhl, Mikkel Schreiber, violas; Mime Yamahiro Brinkmann, Judith-Maria Blomsterberg, cellos; Johannes Lundberg, double bass.

Ordering info: ecmrecords.com

Peter Erskine/Alan Pasqua/Darek Oles
Live In Italy
FUZZY MUSIC ★★★★

While releasing four slamming projects with his dynamic Dr. Um Band, drummer Peter Erskine has maintained a strictly acoustic trio with pianist Alan Pasqua. Their initial two releases on Erskine’s Fuzzy Music label, 2000’s Live At Rocco and 2002’s Badlands, featured West Coast bass great Dave Carpenter, who died in 2008. Darek Oles came onboard with 2007’s Standards and further established his chemistry with Pasqua and Erskine on 2010’s The Interlochen Concert, 2010’s Standards Vol. 2 and 2019’s 3 Nights In L.A. Their latest high-empathetic outing finds them going even deeper.

Recorded at the end of a two-week tour abroad in November 2021, Live In Italy opens with Pasqua’s introspective, three-minute solo-piano intro to his “Agrodolce” before Oles and Erskine enter, walking on eggshells on this melancholic gem. Pasqua also penned the lilting “New Hope” and the medium-tempo swinger “Old Blues,” the latter featuring some hip melodic fills from Erskine, whose own sparsely exquisite “Three-Quarter Molly” culminates in some masterful storytelling on the kit. Oles, a superb soloist, contributes two compositions in the shimmering “Snowglobe” and the uptempo swinger “The Honeymoon,” which finds Pasqua in full-on burn mode and also features some boppish trading between bassist and drummer.

Elsewhere, they take their time on a gorgeous reading of Django Reinhardt’s “Nuages,” turn in an entrancing polyrhythmic rendition of Dizzy Gillespie’s “Con Alma” and pay tribute to Chick Corea on Pasqua’s briskly swinging homage “Dear Chick.” —Bill Milkowski

Live In Italy: Agrodolce; New Hope; Old Blues; Three-Quarter Molly; Tumuraround; Con Alma; Snowglobe; The Honeymoon; Dear Chick. (69:00)

Personnel: Peter Erskine, drums; Alan Pasqua, piano; Darek Oles, bass.

Ordering info: petererskine.com

Pianist Alan Pasqua (left), drummer Peter Erskine and bassist Darek Oles recorded Live In Italy during a November 2021 tour.
Building Fluency & Rapport

There’s no missing the rapport Scottish pianist Fergus McCreadie has developed with bassist David Bowden and drummer Stephen Henderson on the group’s third album, Forrest Floor (Edition; 54:58 ****), attacking his arpeggiated themes with breathless bravado. The trio unleashes an impressive power and unity throughout the new album, but listening to them play is a bit like watching a troupe of acrobats practice. They achieve remarkable feats of physical dexterity and precision, but the compositions are either high-velocity exercises or florid trifles that exist primarily to give the musicians a platform to flex their chops. Rarely does the group reveal a dynamic sensibility beyond pedal-to-the-metal, filling every bit of space with unerring strings of steeplechase virtuosity. “The Unfurrowed Field” begins with an air of contemplation, yet the trio seems unable to resist hitting the accelerator. “Morning Moon” is bona fide ballad, but in this case that simply means the group merely slows down and plays quietly.

Ordering info: editionrecords.com

There’s also boundless virtuosity featured on Trinaiska (AMP; ****), the second album by the sextet led by Swiss-based clarinetist Tome Iliev, but here it comes across as a means to an end. The band-leader is Macedonian, and here and there he borrows the elaborate time signatures of music from the Balkans, although far less so than on the group’s 2019 debut Sketches Of Macedonia. In fact, several tunes incorporate bits of reggae. The production brings out a rock-like gloss, especially in the traditional Neapolitan song “Era de Maggio,” most of his tunes evoke the microtonality of the Middle East and Scandinavian folk rather than Brazilian traditions.

Ordering info: ampmusicrecords.com

The superb Finnish reedist Mikko Innenan — just celebrated for his recent work in bassist Petter Eldh’s Koma Saxo — celebrates the 15th anniversary of his agile trio Plop by collaborating with Finn Juhanu “Junnu” Aaltonen, one of his homeland’s most accomplished winds players. The book of original music on Plop & Junnu (Flasko; 58:40 ****½) is rooted in post-bop pleasures, from the briskly swinging opener “Letter To Han,” where drummer Joonas Riippa embraces the rhythmic grace if not the eccentricity of the titular Dutch master Han Bennink, and the two reedists chew up the scenery with soulfully twinned lines. There’s a glintening lightness of touch on the group improvisation “Alasamu,” while Innenan’s “Täysistunto” supposedly mirrors the action in a plenary session of Finland’s parliament.

Ordering info: bacerecords.com

A century ago, Béla Bartók was traveling through England and Wales with a fellow composer who preferred to go under the name Peter Warlock. The Englishman was fascinated by Bartók’s heroically patient fieldwork in traditional Eastern European folk music. It’s a body of research that offered modernism an alternative to the 12-tone route and its influence is felt to this day: nowhere more so than in the music of Lucian Ban, among whose previous records was a set of trio improvisations with John Surman and Mat Maneri based on the Bartók field recordings.

The influence is still evident on this solo album, produced by Maneri and recorded on a grand-toned Bösendorfer in the Baroque Hall in Timisoara, in the heart of Ban’s native Transylvania. The more explicit influence this time is arguably Carla Bley and to a less definable degree Annette Peacock, who are represented by coolly daring interpretations of “Ida Lupino” and “Albert’s Love Theme,” respectively.

Effortlessly eclectic and encyclopedic in his knowledge of most jazz forms from classic to free, Harlem stride to Tristano, Ban creates the impression that each track could be the threshold to a different album, but the whole coheres thanks to his self-transcending as anything Bill Evans ever committed to record. An astonishing stylist with a near-perfect instinct for dynamics and effective pedaling, Ban is now unquestionably the heart of what does exist: nowhere more so than in the music of Disappearing: The Heart Of What Does Exist; Flatbush Avenue Breakdown; Repose; Albert’s Love Theme; Jalisso; Ways Of Disappearing; Mosques; Owners Of Silence; My Blues; From The Other Side; Rush; Ida Lupino; Guerrero; Cristina’s Hope. (62:04)

Personnel: Lucian Ban, piano.

Ordering info: sunnysiderecords.com

Ways Of Disappearing

★★★★

Lucian Ban

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Beneath the Overpass

How Jam Sessions Under the Turnpike Inspired My Latest Project

The culture of sessioning in the New York area is like nowhere else on the planet. Everybody gets together. When I first moved there, I used to session two times a day, and those get-togethers ended up turning into bands. That’s how I connected with that community. Before COVID hit, I was consistently playing sessions at my Jersey City home two or three times a week. It’s important to my well being and to my craft. It’s a way of developing camaraderie, trust and musically with people, and I didn’t want to lose certain connections.

Once the COVID pandemic made indoor sessions impossible to host, my friend Billy Mintz remembered a spot under the New Jersey Turnpike near the feed out of the Lincoln Tunnel. We’d gotten together and played there once a few years before COVID, and we always talked about going back. I went and checked it out and practiced there and it felt safe. It was very colorful. The atmosphere was very energetic. Even playing there by myself, there was so much sound from all the traffic, from sirens. There’s a lot of activity, plus it’s kind of abandoned in a way and rather Batman-like.

I’m lucky players came out from as far as Queens, Brooklyn, Harlem and the Bronx. Trumpeter Dave Ballou came up from Baltimore. Michael Formanek lives in Jersey, John Hebert lives in Jersey. Tom Rainey came out. Tim Berne came. William Parker was a regular, as was Chris Hoffman. I just wanted to keep the ballgame going in a way.

We had to play totally acoustic. We got into long tones. And we were able to go in a whole other direction with dynamics and really develop triple pianissimos. At the same time, it felt great when you played loud there. And I wanted to create a sound that was transparent, but huge, and that I could play in that place without losing the attack of the bass note.

It became my practice space. I would interact with wildlife, traffic, machinery and sirens, and work on approximating how those sounds were formed, harmonic-wise, shade-wise, color-wise. Were they blaring? The type of attack...
— was it a short attack, a marcato thing?

I worked on scales and getting back to fundamentals like triads and arpeggios. When I started playing there with Hebert, one of the funnest things was playing tunes, like Thelonious Monk’s “Evidence” and a piece called “Just Me, Just Me” (a contrafact of “Just You, Just Me” that I kind of improvised and came out sounding whole.) That’s the last track on my most recent album, *The Cave Of Winds*, which emerged from those sessions under the overpass.

I remember comping for Hebert sometimes on the saxophone, and I would play the shape that became the bridge of the album’s title track. It’s very Monkish, but the melody itself on the “A” section is very lyrical — it really feels like I improvised that. It doesn’t feel like I sat there and worked it out at the piano. It’s because of playing down there. We would also play “Woody ‘N You.” And, again, I was working on developing one idea for a long time, Sonny Rollins-esque.

Another thing that came out of me was a kind of pentatonic shape — something I once worked really hard to escape from because I come from the early-’70s Elvin Jones *Live At The Lighthouse* with Dave Liebman and Steve Grossman generation. So, here I am playing with Hebert under the turnpike and this pentatonic thing just comes rolling out from playing off of the melody of “Woody ‘N You.” As my solo unfolded, I started playing that shape, and that became a thing that I developed. When I gave it to Ben Monder and Michael Formanek and Tom Rainey with the title “Corinthian Leather” for the studio recording, it went beyond anything I had expected.

I had it on a piece of paper from playing with Hebert and Mintz at the turnpike, a little postcard I’d keep on the side. And when Pyroclastic label head Kris Davis approached me about making the record, I had all these little postcards of things that I was shedding. I was getting into contrafacting, one of the ways that I worked when I was very young. I started checking out various contrafacts and thinking about all the tunes Charlie Parker wrote that were contrafacts. The only tune he did that wasn’t a contrafact was a minor tune called “Segment.”

There’s another tune that I was playing with Mintz and Hebert, and I started working out a type of chromaticism just by surrounding the home minor triad — putting the minor triad a half step up, and the one from below. Those tones became a tone row, and I came up with this thing from exploring those shapes with them and trying to be melodic and lyrical while not forcing patterns or licks.

I’m trying to mix color and create shading and tone. That’s something that I worked on the whole time I was down there. And it got to a point where it just becomes part of your sentence structure and also your palette with harmony, and melody, and creating tension with these kinds of tools. It becomes second nature. We recorded that trio of me with Hebert and Mintz, and there are YouTube videos of us playing together down there (youtu.be/X9SxdV5CN8).

*The Cave Of Winds*’ title comes from Mintz being down there under the bridge with me in late January and the whole month of February. It would howl and we were freezing our butts off, but once we started playing, it’s like jumping into a cold river: You just acclimate and the music just grabs you. The wind would start howling and I would get into sonic things with that. I would continue to pretend that I was playing with the wind and how it soared through there, and how it had a point, and how it hit, and how it dissipated. It had this distance and was so full of mystery.

I want things to flow that way when I play. And rhythm is a big part of it. There were a lot of rhythmic things that were working, and Hebert and Mintz were into developing these kinds of polyrhythms — not polymetrics, but polyrhythms. We were trying to not play in each other’s time lines and create tension and rub with that, and doing it by playing fast and being able to move in that way. We would work on 5 over 4, or 5 over 3. “Corinthian Leather” is 5 over 8.

Up to the point of COVID, most of the stuff that I played and recorded was completely improvised. Now, under the turnpike, I suddenly found myself wanting to get back to basics to hone my harmonic palette. And I discovered that everything has evolved in terms of how I’m able to learn and how I’m able to retain things now. It’s not how I was when I was a kid. Today, I have a bigger picture of the scope of jazz, its history and my place within the art form.
Hey, everyone, Brian Bromberg here. For those who don’t know me, I am a bassist, recording artist, producer, composer and bandleader. Like the rest of you, the past couple of years have been a real challenge on so many levels because of how COVID-19 essentially just stopped everything in its tracks. For all musicians who tour and perform live, the door slammed shut — bam! Overnight our live performance calendars got wiped clean — poof! — all gigs gone. At least for me, I can record and produce at home and was able to do three complete projects in 2020. But, the serious downside was that I, as well as most other musicians, couldn’t perform or play live music with other human beings until recently. In my entire 45-year career as a jazz musician, this was by far the longest period that I didn’t play music.

The productions and recordings I was able to work on were lifesavers in many ways for me, but one thing that I realized in this whole process is how when you play regularly, your hands, strength, endurance, ownership of your instrument and overall musicality feels strong and powerful. When you don’t regularly play, all of that suffers greatly, especially being a bass player, since in jazz the bass rarely ever stops playing. We provide the rhythm and harmonic foundation for everyone else to play on and to build on. There is an old saying, “If you don’t use it, you lose it.”

Man, is that statement true, especially walking through fast changes or trying to blow on a fast bebop tune.

Maybe it’s just me and the fact that my life is evolving, but after locking myself in a practice room for half my life, playing at home by myself with nothing on my calendar for so long felt like hiking up a hill with a ’64 Cadillac Coupe DeVille in my backpack. It is so hard to get or be inspired to play at home with no real creative outlet to make music with humans for humans on the horizon. I knew at some point things would start opening and that I would need to be ready to perform at the highest level I could, as I have dedicated my life to just that.

Even though emotionally and musically it was not very rewarding, I forced myself to at least try to practice and keep my ability up, as you never know when you are going to get the call. I always try to split my time between electric bass and upright bass. I have upright and electric basses on stands all over the house to always remind me who’s boss (and it ain’t me) and to kind of force me to pluck basses throughout the day, even if it’s just a few notes here and there as I walk by.

The last two years have been a life-changing experience on so many levels. I’m so glad things are getting better and live music is coming back for real. I am just so happy to be playing again. With new recordings coming out, I want to play as many dates as possible.

Practice Time

My approach to both the acoustic and electric bass is quite similar when it comes to a practice routine. Honestly, I don’t have a major practice routine at this point in my life. But I do have a few rituals that I try to adhere to. I never pick up the acoustic or electric bass and
just start playing a zillion notes — just can’t do that, nor should I. I have done so much tendon and muscle damage to my arms over the years from playing too fast, too hard, too long when I was younger and didn’t warm up properly that I have been paying the price for it my whole career. What I do now is pick up a bass and start nice and slow with scales and long notes. I make sure that I have the proper blood supply to my arms and hands and that I am nice and warm before I start playing faster and more challenging things.

I never plug into a bass amp or play through my studio rig to practice, even on my electric bass. The reason I do that is that your sound is the relationship between your fingers and your instrument. If you can’t make a good acoustic sound on your bass and you plug it into an amp, your amp will reproduce your not-very-good sound and make it louder.

I want my sound to be in my hands and not in my rig, even on electric bass. The only time I use an amp or rig when I practice electric bass, for the most part, is when I must learn specific written notes and need to hear them, or if I am playing to rehearsal tracks in preparation for a gig to make sure that I remember my songs and where to put my fingers.

I play many basses that are tuned differently, which means that I am playing in different keys than the actual key of any given song — so it’s easy to forget what the heck I’m supposed to be playing!

As I said above, if you don’t use it, you lose it. You need to play often enough to keep your strength and endurance, as well as your dexterity and musicality. The only way to be connected to the music and what you hear is to not have to think about your ability to play your instrument. The minute you are thinking about playing your instrument, then you are not playing the music on your instrument. It all must be second nature. The best way for it to be second nature is to play enough and be so connected to your instrument that there is nothing to think about, you just sing through your instrument. We devote our entire lives to putting in the time on our instruments to be able to play like that.

No Apologies: A Bombastic Approach

Just my opinion here, but in many ways, what separates the great from the good isn’t just what they play, it is how they play it. Everyone has their own unique voice and style that makes them sound like them. How many tenor players out there play the same Selmer sax model, same mouthpiece, same reeds, same song and sound different? Not just sound, but style. Stan Getz and Boots Randolph both played tenor sax and sounded completely different in their sound and approach to the instrument. Marcus Miller, Stanley Clarke and the late Jaco Pastorius and Rocco Prestia all played four-string electric bass and sound different from each other in every way. You hear one or two notes from each guy, and you instantly know who it is you are listening to.

That brings me back to the attitude and the approach of funk bass playing. Funk is all attitude, vibe, groove, intensity, pocket, power, strength. No apologies!

That is my approach to playing that music. In your face and undeniable, all attitude. You can play softly and even tenderly but still have that attitude and conviction.

Again, it’s not just what you play, but how you play it. I didn’t spend half my life practicing and dedicating so much to playing the bass to play apologetically or to play radio edits live. If I am going to play for real, I am going to throw down, period.

One of the first guys who inspired me to play that way when I was young was the incomparable, late, great Freddie Hubbard. He took to the stage, put the horn up to his lips, stood in that amazing position with such confidence and power, and would just blow the roof off the joint. The command of his instrument and the music was second to none. He was one of the cats who inspired me to play with that kind of attitude and energy. Just infectious attitude.

I try to play bass like that, especially on a funk or slap-bass song. I don’t want to just play the bass. I want to tell a story that is real, deep and full of humanity.

I don’t want to just play the bass. I want to tell a story that is real, deep and full of humanity.
When considering the key elements of jazz, many musicians would mention chromaticism, swing and a driving pulse. All three of those are noticeably absent in cellist Tomeka Reid’s improvisation on “Cultural Differences,” from the 2017 album Not Live in Fear from the trio Hear In Now, consisting of Reid with violinist Silvia Bolognesi and bassist Mazz Swift. She employs other powerful musical devices to create a highly emotive improvisation that I would consider within the realm of jazz.

During the solo, Swift plays a slow ostinato in C that I’ve written out at the start of the transcription. But with all the space in the line and the absence of any other rhythm section players, the time is very loose, which Reid uses to her advantage, bending the time to her will. This means that, as the transcriber, I have to make choices (or guesses) as to how to present these rhythms, and I recommend you don’t treat them as metronomic, but instead as an interpretation of Reid’s elastic phrases.

Reid often plays over the barline, which adds further ambiguity to her solo lines, most of which don’t create the sense of starting or landing on a downbeat (a rare exception being the concurring downbeat of cello and bass at measure 6). This does get compounded by the construction of the bass line: even though this section is in 4/4, Reid has the bass coming in on beat 3 of the second bar and then playing dotted quarters, making it sound like a full measure of 3/4 (or 6/8, really). It sounds like a bar of 5/4 followed by a measure of 6/8. Even so, Reid doesn’t land on the second beat of the second bar very often, either. She starts out there sometimes (for example, bars 3 and 5), but through the remainder of this solo she tends to improvise right over it.

Reid’s choice of notes also contributes to a feeling of ambiguity in her solo. This section is
clearly in C, and the bass line could be heard as a IV–I progression. Reid does stay within the C major scale for the entire solo. However, she doesn’t seem to make any attempt at making it sound like chord changes. She frequently emphasizes various parts of the C scale, and not always within the implied chord.

The first few bars are centered around the E (third of C) but in measures 5 and 6 Reid switches to leaning on the A and B. You could make the argument that these are the thirds of the F and G in the bass line, and therefore Reid is playing as if there are changes, except the A and the B show up three beats ahead of those chords. Also, when it resolves back to C in the next bar, Reid lands squarely on A natural (the sixth). Though any note could be labeled as either a chord tone or an extension of these harmonies, the way Reid varies her stressed notes all over the scale and doesn’t come to rest on strong beats produces a much different emotional effect than playing changes.

Adding to this effect, Reid stops using F natural completely after the first few bars, despite it being a note in the bass part. This skipping over a pitch makes her playing sound less scalar overall. Reid will sometimes omit the C as well (see the ends of measures 5 and 7, and bars 11 and 14). Skipping over the tonic creates more of this wash of tonality, as the bass is defining the key but the melody is playing most everything else.

Besides the thirds created when Reid jumps a note, there are a few instances where she uses larger intervals. We hear ascending minor sevenths in bars 6 and 16, a descending fourth at the end of measure 10 and the middle of bar 12, and an ascending fifth in measure 20.

Jazz improvisations are generally constructed in this manner: mostly scalar motion with thirds to break it up, and the occasional use of larger intervals. But if everything remains scalar all of the time, a solo can come across like practicing — and ultimately be less interesting. If larger intervals are used too much in a solo, it can sound disjointed (or at least unmelodic). Like a chef combining ingredients to create a new dish, improvisers and composers must grapple with which of the various musical elements at their disposal to include in any given phrase — and in this sense, Reid strikes a wonderful balance.

As Reid’s solo comes to an end, the violin picks up the line as the group moves into another written section. This style of transition is another thing you don’t hear often in jazz, but it’s an effective and highly musical means of leading our ears out of Reid’s improvisation and into the rest of the composition.

Jimi Durso is a guitarist and bassist based in the New York area. He recently released an album of Indian classical music played on the string bass, titled Border Of Hiranyaloka. Find out more at jimidurso.bandcamp.com.
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More info: shermusic.com
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Summertime Programs a Hit at CJC’s Jazzschool

AS THE SUMMER WINDS DOWN, WE LOOK at one of the great jazz learning opportunities that’s been happening this year, the 25-year-old Jazzschool program in California. Located in the heart of Berkeley in Northern California, Jazzschool held its first Summer Youth Program in 2002. Now a part of the California Jazz Conservatory — the sole independent and accredited conservatory devoted to jazz through its associate’s, bachelor’s and master’s degree programs — Jazzschool continues to offer focused summertime study through its single-, three- or five-day series.

The Jazzschool’s current summer programs fall under three categories: the Jazzschool Young Musicians Program and High School Intensive; The Girls’ Jazz & Blues Workshop series; and, on the adult side, the Summer Jazz Piano Intensive, the Summer Jazz Guitar Intensive and the Summer Vocal Intensive.

“The idea for a summer program was to not let a significant number of weeks go by without offering something,” said Susan Muscarella, CJC’s founding president and dean of instruction. The idea of bridging what students were learning either in their school’s band rooms or through the Jazzschool from school year to school year was popular among parents and motivated students, too.

“I grew a lot as a pianist by getting introduced to a lot of different genre approaches,” said pianist, composer and vocalist Samora Pinderhughes, who was a 2022 Doris Duke Charitable Foundation Creative Inflections grant recipient, of his experiences as part of the inaugural Summer Youth Program. The Berkeley native attended as a middle school student and is part of a growing list of professional artists who attended, including pianist/accordionist Sam Reider and Lorenzo Loera, bassist for The California Honeydrops at the same time he was there.

“Like Brazilian music, for instance,” he said, “my parents listened to it, but I never played it until Jazzschool, where there were a lot of Brazilian teachers. I was playing music from different places while I was studying there. Also, it’s just a dope community. A lot of folks I played with during that time I met through the Jazzschool”

For 2022, all instruction returned to being in-person at the Jazzschool’s campus in the Downtown Berkeley Arts District, about half a mile from the famed University of California, Berkeley campus.

The Young Musicians Program, directed by Erik Jekabson, is for middle school and high school students. Musicians meet twice a week (either Monday and Wednesday or Tuesday and Thursday) for three weeks, with middle school ensembles learning jazz repertoire and improvisation, and high school combos delving deeper into jazz improvisation approaches and exploring theory.

Michael Zilber leads the High School Intensive, which matches each student with a teacher on the same instrument. “So there’s two ensembles in the room together, working, as opposed to the traditional model where there’s just an ensemble with one teacher for the whole group,” said Rob Ewing, Jazzschool community music school director. The Summer Youth Program unfolds over the course of five six-hour days, while the High School Intensive runs across five five-and-a-half-hour days. It also includes private lessons, master classes and student-run rehearsals.

Junior high and high school students attend not only from the East Bay, in which Berkeley is situated, but also from San Francisco, Marin County and Silicon Valley, he said. The campus is about a block away from the Downtown Berkeley Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) station. “The kids can come by themselves on BART, and it’s an easy walk over,” Muscarella pointed out.

The Downtown Berkeley Arts District itself is a destination neighborhood. Both the Berkeley Repertory Theatre and Freight & Salvage non-profit community arts center are on the same block, and restaurants serving international cuisine can be found all within a five-minute stroll.

“Students might want to take an acting class or go to one of the Freight and Salvage concerts,” she noted. “It’s really exciting for them to see all of the arts organizations around us.”

Taught through specific instruments, the adult intensives were led by pianist Muscarella; guitarist Mimi Fox, a CJC associate professor; guitarist Howard Alden, this year’s special guest faculty member; Laurie Antonioli, chair of CJC vocal jazz studies; and vocalist Theo Bleckman.

The students, including some advanced teens, attend from various part of North America and the world, studying skills like comping and playing unaccompanied in the case of piano and guitar programs; for vocalists, improvisation, phrasing, arranging and more.

Five of the programs conclude with concerts that are open to the public on the final evening. Young Musicians Program participants perform in an all-student concert, while High School Intensive and Guitar Intensive Friday evening showcases feature a combination of students and faculty members. The Piano and Vocal Intensive participants, in turn, perform with faculty rhythm sections.

Having a week or a weekend of concentrated study and rehearsal readies students in any of those five courses to perform at the end.

“At that point, they feel good about doing a show for friends and family,” Muscarella said. “And it’s a highlight of their time here.”

—Yoshi Kato
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Blindfold Test › BY TED PANKEN

Spike Wilner

As the proprietor of two globally famous Greenwich Village jazz clubs, pianist Michael “Spike” Wilner, 55, has booked most of New York’s finest practitioners of the 88s since he purchased Smalls in 2007 and opened Mezzrow in 2014, while continuing to refine his own, distinctive tonal personality on the instrument, as documented most recently on Aliens And Wizards (Cellar Live), with bassist Tyler Mitchell and drummer Anthony Pincottti. This is his first Blindfold Test.

George Cables

Two Close For Comfort” (Too Close For Comfort, High Note, 2021) Cables, piano; Essiet Okun Essiet, bass; Victor Lewis, drums.

The trio plays the shit out of that amazing, dense arrangement, then sounds great on the blowing — very modern vocabulary, lyrical taste and beauty and driving swing. Jeb Patton’s trio? I’m wondering who else I know who plays like that. Obviously a contemporary player — younger than me, in other words. He’s not? [afterwards] Three masters. 5 stars.

Aaron Diehl

“Milano” (The Vagabond, Mack Avenue, 2020) Diehl, piano; Paul Sikulov, bass; Gregory Hutchinson, drums.

That’s Aaron Diehl. I’m not familiar with this piece — whether it’s an original or something he adapted for the trio. From the first few notes, before I realized it was Aaron, I heard the gorgeous piano sound. The touch is beautiful, like a classical pianist almost. I noticed it had a very Chopinesque vibe, then it went into this groovy Erroll Garner-esque feeling, but with so much beautiful modern harmony. The trio is well-disciplined. A remarkable piece of music. 5 stars.

Geoffrey Keezer

“Brilliant Corners” (On My Way To You, MarKeez, 2018) Keezer, piano, Fender Rhodes; Mike Pope, bass; Lee Pearson, drums.

My immediate first thought was Robert Glasper. The change of textures surprised me — they started the Monk tune as a traditional trio and then transitioned to an electric feel, and really went for it. A visceral performance. Fantastic, high-level playing by everyone. Gerald Clayton? Sometimes I have conservative objections to taking something from Monk ... but in this case, it was so well-done and so cool. I think it’s a masterpiece. It blew my mind. 5 stars. [afterwards] Geoff lives in this rarefied stratosphere of musical talent — monster facility on the piano, monster ideas and vociferous energy. Aggression, but with beauty; nothing ugly there.

Matthew Shipp

“Portrait Of An Angel” (Canvas, Blue Note, 2005) Glasper, piano; Vicente Archer, bass; Damian Reid, drums.

A professional trio by any standard — very good musicians. That’s a beautiful piece of music. I love the transition to solo piano interlude. The solos are motivic and lyric, a modern sound, with good feeling, and great solos from the bass and drums. 5 stars. [afterwards] That track proves to anyone who had any doubts what a great piano player and what a sophisticated jazz musician Robert is.

Gerald Clayton

“My Ideal, Take 1” (Bells On Sand, Blue Note, 2022) Clayton, piano.

“My Ideal.” I thought about Brad Mehldau, Fred Hersch — people who play a lot of counterpoint in their improvisation. I liked that it wasn’t derivative when they finally got into their thing, during the second chorus. Beautiful touch. The time feel was strong, but still open, and the lines were beautiful. Very creative. The sound quality on this recording was remarkable. 5 stars.

Ahmad Jamal


That’s a new record and a very inspired one. The tenor player is killing. 5 stars.

Robert Glasper

“Portrait Of An Angel” (Canvas, Blue Note, 2005) Glasper, piano; Vicente Archer, bass; Damian Reid, drums.

A professional trio by any standard — very good musicians. That’s a beautiful piece of music. I love the transition to solo piano interlude. The solos are motivic and lyric, a modern sound, with good feeling, and great solos from the bass and drums. 5 stars. [afterwards] That track proves to anyone who had any doubts what a great piano player and what a sophisticated jazz musician Robert is.

Kirk Lightsey/Rufus Reid


“Oleo.” Someone who loves Phineas Newborn, who knows how to play an uptempo “Rhythm” changes, and throw down on it. Frenetic energy. My immediate impression is it’s someone from a generation older than mine, but I’m at a loss as to who — so many people could play in that way. These guys obviously play a lot of duo; they took care of business in terms of time and fire. 5 stars.

Renee Rosnes

“Swoop” (Kinds Of Love, Smoke Sessions, 2021) Rosnes, piano; Chris Potter, tenor saxophone; Christian McBride, bass; Carl Allen, drums.

Everyone falls into the category of top professional New York player, to my ears. I’m sure I know them all. The tune is super-cool, kind of a Tristano vibe with the tenor and piano playing that great line together, and strong hits. The pianist is a very strong improviser, playing great lines in the upper register, with a beautiful touch and a facility to execute with clarity, which is a jazz pianist’s calling card — and you don’t hear it that often. The tenor player is killing. 5 stars.

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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