2021 was supposed to be different. We’d waited all year for 2020 to pass, to turn the calendar page on a pandemic, on a toxic presidency, on a divisive society. That New Year’s optimism didn’t even last a week. On Jan. 6th, a riotous, bloodthirsty mob attacked the U.S. Capitol building during the certification of the presidential election. Lives were lost and federal property was damaged but, perhaps most significantly, Newt Gingrich’s notion of American exceptionalism finally was buried in the cemetery of other ridiculous political notions. Of course, former president Trump, whose supporters they were, endorsed them after exhorting them to commit said violence: “We Love You. You Are Special.” This is the same man—the term used technically—who called Black Lives Matters protesters “thugs” and threatened them with the most “vicious dogs and most ominous weapons.”

There is no question that he meant what he said and had the protesters been people of color, we would have still be counting the bodies and identifying the dead. That is the stain that Trump leaves on this country, yet the reality of racial injustice in this country both long predates him and will long outlive him. As we come to February and our Black History Month issue, the idea that racism, police brutality and two justice systems are not history but, instead, the present and future. False equivalence between protesters scared for their lives as motorists or average citizens and those whose sense of privilege and entitlement has been stoked to the point of rampage will continue. Trump, his minions and the next violent demagogue to try to take his mantle will make sure of that, no matter what year it may be. Just like every day should be Earth Day, Black History needs more than one month a year to be woven into this country’s heritage so that perhaps some day to be Black in America is not to be second-class or a target or a victim of political opportunism.

While the Arts can only do so much, it can help to humanize the other, to create empathy and educate on the plights and successes of those different than us. With that in mind, we dedicate this issue’s features and a front-loaded Album Reviews section (pgs. 12-19) to a wide array of Black artists, of various ages, backgrounds and experience, celebrating their contributions not only to jazz specifically but to the societal fabric, one of whose myriad holes are in need of darning.

On The Cover: Ralph Peterson (photo by Dave Green)

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Unfortunately Peterson's career also succumbed to the dual temptations of alcohol and cocaine prevalent on the jazz scene, rendering him unemployable at times, as his habit, he confesses, escalated from "recreation to occupation." Now approaching 25 years of sobriety, he recalls his tenure with Carter at the beginning of his stage of renewed self-awareness. "I thought my ship had sailed. I thought I was too old to have gotten that opportunity to learn from Betty. I was 34 when I got the gig and I stayed for nine months and it was the greatest nine months of music in my entire life. To have been able to learn from Betty at that level of awareness, where everything she said didn't sound like she was speaking a foreign language. Like when she was teaching me to play brushes and didn't want me to sweep. She said, 'they're brushes, ain't they? So paint!' That opened up the door and the ballad took off."

Before Carter, Peterson learned from the other foremost mentor of that time, Art Blakey. Jazz Messenger tenor saxophonist Billy Pierce remembers one of the young drummer’s early encounters with Blakey. "I think Terence had something to do with bringing him to Art. I just remember him being really enthusiastic. You could tell that he really wanted to play and that he was really happy and honored to be around Art, which was kind of nice." Peterson could be seen regularly hanging out around Art at New York venues like Sweet Basil, Mikkell's and the Jazz Forum learning at the feet of the master. One night Blakey checked him out performing with the Harrison-Blanchard Quintet at the Universal Jazz Coalition loft and did him the honor of sitting in on his kit. Soon afterwards whenever the chief Messenger was asked who his favorite young drummers were, Peterson was at the top of the list.

Blakey’s affection was expressed not only in words, but deeds. He drafted Peterson to fill the second drum chair in his Jazz Messengers Big Band at the Boston Globe Jazz Festival in 1983 and he continued with the ensemble at the Mt. Fuji Jazz Festival in Japan and other venues right up to Blakey’s death in 1990. Peterson has honored the influence of his years with Blakey with the group Ralph Peterson and the Messenger Legacy. Its debut, Legacy Alive, on Peterson’s Onyx Music, had an all-star cast of Blakey alumni—Pierce, Watson, Brian Lynch and Geoff Keezer—on 11 Messenger classics. Last year’s Onward & Upward was even more ambitious: 11 original compositions and arrangements by a revolving cast of 17 different players, 14 of whom played in the Messengers.

Pierce, who appears on both albums, says of Peterson’s playing, "It definitely feels like Art, more than anybody. That I can think of right now. He loved Art so much and the influence Art had on him, it really shows up in the way he plays and the way he leads. He has the spirit of Art without a doubt." The saxophonist continues, "He's a fabulous drummer. He can play a lot of different styles in a lot of different settings and that's a flexibility that everyone doesn't have, but he certainly has. He is a complete musician, he's a really great composer andarranger and obviously he can teach."

Pierce witnessed Peterson’s prowess as an educator during his tenure at Berklee. "By then he had made the transformation to solid citizen and a mentor to so many young people. Over the years I’ve really come to admire that about Ralph because he really is a mentor to a lot of young students at Berklee and that’s pretty admirable because you don’t really have to do that. You can go to being a professor, but you won’t necessarily be touching people and giving them the kind of influence and understanding of what is necessary and the kind of dedication that it takes. It’s partially through his own example, but it’s also because he can kind of break it down for them in terms of words, but it’s always accompanied by actions. He really has established himself as quite a figure in terms of young people at Berklee in terms of going forward in the music, which is more than admirable. It’s pretty great actually."

Peterson’s Gen-Next Big Band’s album Listen Up!, featuring a cast of young Berklee students, topped the 65th Annual DownBeat Critics Poll. The list of players that he has mentored includes not only drummers Kush Abadey, Johnathan Blake, Justin Faulkner, E.J. Strickland and Mark Whifflet, Jr., but also trumpetman Sean Jones, saxophonist Melissa Aldana and the Curtis Brothers—pianist Zaccai and bassist Luques—both of whom record regularly with the drummer, including on his forthcoming album. Peterson says of the date, which also features conguero Reinaldo DeJesus and guest vocalist Jazzmeia Horn, "The well of inspirations on this particular project is coming from none other than the legendary Hampton Hawes, Raise Up Off Me [the title of Hawes’ autobiography] is what I’m calling this record because I believe as a society that’s kind of exactly where we’re at. We need this dude [the now former president] to raise up off of us, so we can get back to getting this virus to raise up off of us, so we can get back to being productive, making music and getting together and getting healthy and getting on with our lives."
**DRAGO**

**DIEGO BARBER**

For his new recording, Drago, Barber departs from his recent focus on blending contemporary classical music and jazz to focus on electronic music, utilizing elements from both the classical and dancefloor models. A two-year long study of Logic music programming has led the fleet fingered string specialist to eschew the guitar for the most part to focus on composing pieces in a new and highly personal way.

**STEPHANIE NILLES**

“I PLEDGE ALLEGIANCE TO THE FLAG - THE WHITE FLAG”

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—“Stephanie Nilles is possibly the most compelling jazz piano/lounge punk singer since Tom Waits started chain smoking and singing about sailors.” AudioSuede

The voices of African American militants continue to ring in the vanguard’s ears. One such musical example is the late, great bassist/composer Charles Mingus, whose music was vehemently charged with indignation concerning the rights of the downtrodden. His messages, both outright and nuanced, are touchstones for many musicians who choose to trodden. His messages, both outright and nuanced, are touchstones for many musicians who choose to address these issues, including singer-songwriter/pianist Stephanie Nilles, who interprets Mingus’s canon on her new recording, I PLEDGE ALLEGIANCE TO THE FLAG – THE WHITE FLAG.

**Herbie Nichols**

Although Herbie Nichols only released four records, he left a legacy of fervent devotees, including fellow pianist **Jason Moran**, who, in celebration of Nichols’ 102nd birthday (Jan. 3rd), aired a rare 1962 interview of Nichols conducted by Mait Eady for the radio program The Scope of Jazz. Interlaced with cuts from Nichols’ Blue Note albums—“Double Exposure”, “Hangover Triangle”, “House Party Starting”, “Teripschere”, adaptation of Mendelssohn’s “The Spinning Song”, “Wildflower”, “The Third World” and George Gershwin’s “Mine”—the program gave Moran’s 100+ Facebook guests an opportunity to make real-time responses to the music by leaving comments in the chat menu. Having transcribed a chunk of the music himself, Moran was outspoken and articulate, remarking on Nichols’ “register extremes” or praising his “melody forever and a day”. During an especially inspiring passage on “Wildflower”, however, even Moran seemed at a loss for words, but his response said it all: “Daaaaaamn!!!” As with any master’s work, there is always something new to hear, so where one listener noticed an “Erroll Garner-ish” left hand, another praised the rhythmic “bounce”, another the prevalence of hemiolas. It was a further revelation to hear Nichols’ soft spoken but illuminating answers to Eady’s prompts, providing context for his music. His beef with jazz critics? They should all have a music degree: “[T]here can be new worlds of criticism if the critics are more discerning.” —Tom Greenland

**Herbie Nichols**

For those with a taste for the avant garde, seasoned musician/composer Joseph Daley’s “Colorations-Explorations” is quite the adventure. Daley has been firmly rooted in jazz, but his current effort is best described in the Minimalist tradition of Terry Riley, Steve Reich and others. The work was premiered in February 2020 live, but this iteration was recorded to la pandemic, with 23 musicians recording themselves separately in their homes. Added to the mix was visual enhancement—the insertion of many images from nature and otherwise, with the addition of quick cuts and other filmic tricks of the trade. For those whose tastes run to more traditional musical forms, the video approach enriched the experience by adding texture to the repetitive sounds and dissonant harmonic and chordal structure of the composition. What was most enlightening was the large collective that energetically and masterfully played “Colorations-Explorations”. This group was Dance Clarinets, the adult woodwind ensemble of Greenwich House Music School, led by faculty member and clarinetist, JD Parran. Beside the common B-flat clarinet, there were at least ten different kinds of clarinet, with sub-variations in pitch, keyboard and bore. Hearing many of these variants played in itself was completely mesmerizing and enthralling. Add to that some creative touches by Warren Smith on vibraphone, percussion and gongs and the result, 34 minutes of sheer creativity, was truly fascinating.

—Marilyn Lester

**Like many jazz instrumentalists who sing, Paul Jost has his vocal style informed by his years as a drummer, his delivery, scatting and phrasing intensely rhythmic. And, as that iconic commercial enthused, wait there’s more! On top of superb musicianship, Jost brings a huge quotidian of passion to the table. He inhabits the music, deeply feeling every note and syllable he vocalizes. The man is a consummate storyteller and completely “woke”. Streaming live from Brooklyn’s Soapbox Gallery (Jan. 12th), Jost began his set with a monologue of poetic sensibility on recent tragic events at the Capitol building in DC, underscored by his trio; this morphed seamlessly into a parlando-like rendition of “If I Only Had a Brain” (Harold Arlen-Yip Harburg). Pianist Jim Ridl, bassist Dean Johnson and drummer Obed Calvaire. Penman and Calvaire revved their proficient technique and vivid imagination, especially with the resurgence of COVID-19 cases, and the result, 34 minutes of sheer creativity, was truly fascinating.” —Marilyn Lester

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Margaret Eady’s prompts, providing context for his music. His beef with jazz critics? They should all have a music degree: “[T]here can be new worlds of criticism if the critics are more discerning.” —Tom Greenland

**Stephanie Nilles**

There aren’t many jazz venues open for performance, especially with the resurgence of COVID-19 cases, and many are opting to play it safe with home-based concerts. But there’s only so much musical mojo that can be cooked up in the privacy of one’s studio, so it was inspiring to see guitarist Mike Moreno onstage at Bar Bayeux (Jan. 6th) with keyboardist Jon Cowherd, bassist Matt Penman and drummer Obed Calvaire. Unfortunately, safety precautions precluded a live audience, but the musicians’ shared chemistry was evident even over a live-stream broadcast. Moreno’s albums include many of his own tunes, so it wasn’t surprising to hear him try out a few new, yet untitled compositions: the sequentially melodic opener, which transitioned organically back to the head after a series of improvisations; a dreamy ballad with an arpeggiated chordal structure of the composition. What was most entralling was the large collective that energetically and masterfully played “Colorations-Explorations”. This group was Dance Clarinets, the adult woodwind ensemble of Greenwich House Music School, led by faculty member and clarinetist, JD Parran. Beside the common B-flat clarinet, there were at least ten different kinds of clarinet, with sub-variations in pitch, keyboard and bore. Hearing many of these variants played in itself was completely mesmerizing and enthralling. Add to that some creative touches by Warren Smith on vibraphone, percussion and gongs and the result, 34 minutes of sheer creativity, was truly fascinating.” —Marilyn Lester

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**Joseph Daley**
A throbbing enthusiasm stood as a near entity unto itself as group interplay commanded the airwaves (Jan. 7th). Arts for Art’s OnLine Salon series welcomed the Fay Victor Chamber Trio, an ensemble carving the path of vocal artistry’s role in contemporary music. Her voice is a rare instrument, matched only by her fortitude. Victor, alto saxophonist Darius Jones and cellist Mariha Hughes tore through a set uniting free jazz, Anetha Franklin, spoken word, new music and post-bop, swinging and grooving, sans drums and bass.

And, as per usual, political action wasn’t far off: “I’d like to dedicate this next piece,” the vocalist stated, “to all of the Stepford Women and Stepford Husbands,” she said, introducing a work threading haunting alto, busy cello pizzicato and a modernist melody of slow laps across the octave and beyond. Over the telling phrase, “I live in a dream state where all is perfect”, Victor’s larynx contortions teetered over the soprano summit before dragging haughtily across its sub-level, releasing guttural cries. Soon the three were engaging in three-part counterpoint and rapid call and response, drawing on the length of the jazz tradition. When not shaping the sound with warm arco, Hughes’ pizzicato turned into walking bass, driving the group further, offering pivot points for the flights of the others. Jones’ elegant vibrato, particularly in the opening segment of “Do Right Woman, Do Right Man”, was utterly classic, sending Victor into highly memorable rhythm-and-ballad mode, bringing it on home. — John Pietaro

The closure of traditional performance venues due to pandemic restrictions has resulted in musicians taking matters into their own hands, establishing alternative settings in which they can reach audiences. The Underexposed live-streamed concert series hosted by bassist Desmond White in his Brooklyn basement has been doing just that. The 16th (Jan. 11th) edition of the Monday night sets had vibraphonist Joel Ross throwing down with his trio of bassist Ben Tiberio and drummer Craig Weinrib. The music began dramatically with an extended solo bass improvisation, which flowed into the familiar loping cadence of John Coltrane’s “Equinox”, Ross stretching out with deliberate melodicism. This segued into a swaggering rendition of Thelonious Monk’s “Evidence”, tagged with a coda dubbed “Dence”, vibraphone laying down a rhythmic vamp over a martial drum beat. Impressionistic solo vibraphone prefaced the fittingly titled Ross original “Haunting”, the composer’s sustained notes evincing an ominous atmosphere on top of rumbling bass and drums. The mood brightened with the vibraphonist’s melodically appealing “The Nurturer”, a soulfully swinging outing, which was followed by his “Minor Joy”, a rhythmic tour de force featuring Weinrib. Ross played the opening chorus of “Round Midnight” alone, before his partners joined in for a stirring version of the Monk standard. They then ended with a spirited blues referencing Bobby Timmons’ classic “Moanin’.” — Russ Musto

Volume 40 of Live From Emmet’s Place had Emmet Cohen celebrating Martin Luther King Day (Jan. 18th) with a piano summit dedicated to the late Cedar Walton, commemorating his previous day’s birthday. The pianist-host kicked things off playing “Cedar’s Blues”, stretching out on the jaunty melody before giving way to Russell Hall’s lyrical bass solo and rhythmic four-bar exchanges with drummer Kyle Poole. Walton cohort Joe Farnsworth came in on drums for Sam Jones’ “Something In Common”, Cohen hitting hard on walking bass and crisp snare accents. Julius Rodriguez took over at the piano for John Coltrane’s “Naima”, opening rhapsodically then grooving on the Latin-ish arrangement. Poole was back for Walton’s pretty “Martha’s Prize”, after which pianist Mathis Picard came in for a bluesy medley of Burt Bacharach-Hal David’s “This Guy’s In Love With You” and Walton’s “Groundwork”. Cohen and Farnsworth returned for Harold Arlen-Yip Harburg’s “Somewhere Over The Rainbow”, dedicating it to the recently departed Junior Mance and Sammy Nestico. On a fireynumber, Cohen recalled “Firm Roots” and “Hindsight” Cognac at a blazing tempo, escalating as Rodriguez and Picard and Farnsworth and Poole took turns, climaxing with all the pianists at the keyboard. Cohen dedicated “The Maestro” to Walton’s widow Martha and Rodriguez played Lew Brown-Sammy Fain’s “That Old Feeling”. Then all were back to finish swinging hard on “The Theme”. (RM)
Larry Roland is a poet of the bass and the pen with nearly four decades of professional experience across a variety of fields. After graduating from Boston University in 1973 with a BS in Education, he taught health and P.E. in the local public school system. He later earned a Master’s degree in Public Health from the University of Massachusetts. All the while, he was refining his poetic voice, drawing on everyday life around him to reflect on both individual and collective pasts and continues to do so in his current home of New York City. Along the way, he found kindred solace in the upright bass, alongside which he cut his teeth as part of the house band at Wally’s in Boston’s South End. After touring and recording with trumpeter Raphe Malik and founding the Urge 4Tet with pianist Donal Fox, he released his first album of solo bass and spoken word, As Time Flows On, in 2001. Next for him was the Baseline Motion project with dancer/choreographer Adrienne Hawkins, plus an acclaimed record with the Charles Gayle Trio, Streets, in 2011. Since 2012, he has been involved in We Free SIRINGS, a free jazz ensemble intent on dismantling the ethos of Western musical paradigms. Most recently, he put out a book of poetry, “Just Sayin’!!”, in 2019 and in 2020 was featured on the album We Were Here by The Jazz & Poetry Choir Collective, of which he is a founding member.

The New York City Jazz Record: Can you tell me a little about those early days at Wally’s?

Larry Roland: That was my school, man. We played bebop — no ballads — every night from 9 pm to 2 am. We had Roy Hargrove, Antonio Hart, Tommy Campbell, Billy Kilson...you name it. And there I was, somehow ending up as the bass player.

TNYCJR: On your solo album, As Time Flows On, you’ve got this track called “The Journey”, which resonates deeply during this time of pandemic. In it, you talk about the “realization of being bound” and how the spirit has been manipulated. It’s missing. There’s so much so that my mom would get tired of seeing Roy’s hand in my house. And I was, somehow ending up as the bass player.

TNYCJR: Where and how does the music fit into all of this?

LR: I grew up in a household filled with Bird, Trane, Lee Morgan, Sonny Rollins, Yusef Lateef and Stravinsky. During that time, we still had a little record store on the corner where you could find all sorts of music. Jimmy Smith, Jimmy McGriff, Jack McDuff, I was inundated with all of that. Plus, my dad knew a lot of musicians. He and Roy Haynes were tight. So much so that my mom would get tired of seeing Roy’s drums in the living room. “Put dem drums back in the hall!” she’d say. Around Christmastime, we would get these postcards from creative people all over the world. Every time I looked at them, I couldn’t help but think, now that’s freedom. Whenever people ask me about the most significant thing growing up that really helped shape my perception into who I am today, I always say it was the music. My dad knew these people: painters, musicians, intellectuals. They would meet in my house and break down stuff in ways I never experienced on the outside. They were all focused more on the qualitative than the quantitative. Some of the deepest stuff I heard was in my living room.

TNYCJR: In listening to your spoken word especially, I get this palpable sense that you’re looking at history with clear and open eyes. Whereas the world may cut and repaste it into a different narrative, you’re trying to get to the heart of it, in the same way a genealogist may draw up a family tree. How do you see yourself making a contribution?

LR: It all comes back to the spirit. People sometimes tell me, man. I’ve never seen anyone procrastinate as much as you; you should be doing this, that and the other. But I am doing it. You just don’t see it. I’m always creating in my mind. I’m just not about trying to be up front with it and gain all the attention. This brother, Hasan Abdul-Karim, I play with sometimes—in his 80s and still blowing tenor—is really into astrology, so he offered to do my chart one time. He said, “I wish I had your stars. You don’t even have to do anything. You’re linked to the universe. That’s special. That’s power. Spiritual power.” So I walked with that. I try to stay what I call “naturonic”. I try to move with nature. These days, I have a little mouse in my pantry. Most people would see him as a nuisance, but he’s trying to live the same way we’re trying to live. He’s not trying to bring attention to himself. He respects my space and I respect his. The odds are against him. Maybe he’s got a crevice behind the wall and maybe even a family he’s bringing crumbs to. Maintaining that connection to the little things is how I’ve been able to move ahead and navigate the terrain. Just be as still as you can and your surroundings will speak to you.

(Continued on Page 11)
One day before the horrendously odious storming of the U.S. Capitol building by Trump supporters in Washington DC, bassist, composer, writer and activist Luke Stewart was readying himself for recording sessions in Philadelphia and New York City. His work ethic has been cited numerous times, an ability to release many records in short stretches of time across an extremely diverse repertoire of quality jazz, punk and improvised music. Because of his breadth of output, Stewart is able to explore the cyclical tides of American culture, which ebbs and flows between imminent danger and quieted socio-political seasons, which denote a deceptive existence of post-racialism.

He’s not a voyer who lives solely in his inner world but interacts with the external resistance of peace and equality in America, attending protests and showing his disdain for right-wing extremism.

“It was surprisingly diverse,” Stewart says of attendance of the first pro-Trump rally in Washington DC, where he marched as a counter-protestor of Trump’s followers and sinister cause some months ago. “But I won’t be at [the protest] tomorrow.”

As a force of nature and a productive cyclone, he errs to the side of peace more than leading the international jazz community with a demanding iron fist. He has very little entitlement while others fashion him as the builder, sustainer and protector of the DC jazz scene. While his music should always be recognized, Stewart is also a writer and co-founder of the jazz-centered organization Capitalbop, which highlights DC-based jazz artists and, before COVID-19, curated live music events, creating a tightly woven source of expression and communion in Washington DC.

His latest piece for Capitalbop’s online publication is “The Legend of Yahya Abdul-Majid”, where he ruminates on the Sun Ra Arkestra saxophonist’s life and works, showing a side of Stewart that is astute and poignant.

In regards to the cycles of civil unrest that swirl around Stewart’s personhood as he navigates throughout, he tries not to allow it to swallow his consciousness to where he becomes overwhelmed and unable to enact his several endeavors. Nonetheless, he’s able to pull artistically from said cycles. “I find that there are a lot more loops in some of the [music] I’ve been working on personally. Perhaps that’s a reflection of my recognizing the cycles that I’ve experienced and also, as a student of history, seeing the cycles and also seeing the historical developments that led us here, specifically the thought processes that lead a person or system to continuously make these attacks on oppressed communities.”

All the while America’s walls of systemic racism come crashing down upon itself, Stewart heads back and forth between different American cities (as much as the pandemic will allow) continuing to create much-needed music. As noted, he planted himself in Philadelphia to concentrate on a completely new body of work with Irreversible Entanglements, a band that has blown the tops of the stuffy traditionalism of jazz by taking the conversion of spoken word and free jazz, which was masterfully done by artists like Sun Ra and Archie Shepp, Raw Poetic, Damu The Fudgemunk – Ocean Bridges (Redefinition, 2019).

Recommended Listening:
- Irreversible Entanglements – Eponymous (International Anthem, 2015)
- Blacks’ Myths – Eponymous (Atlantic Rhythms, 2018)
- James Brandon Lewis – An Uproary Manifesto (Relative Pitch, 2018)
- Archie Shepp, Raw Poetic, Damu The Fudgemunk – Ocean Bridges (Redefinition, 2019)
- Heroes Are Gang Leaders – Artificial Happiness Button (Ropeadope, 2019)

For more information, visit thelukestewart.com. Stewart live-streams Feb. 19th and 16th at artsforart.org/onlinesalon.html.

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- Heroes Are Gang Leaders – Artificial Happiness Button (Ropeadope, 2019)
Henry Franklin has enjoyed a career as a prolific jazz bassist for over 60 years, performing with a range of artists including Freddie Hubbard, Hampton Hawes, Dexter Gordon, Gene Harris, Doug Carn, Archie Shepp, Willie Bobo, Blue Mitchell, Marcus Belgrave, Al Jarreau and Hugh Masekela, among many others. A native of Los Angeles, Franklin has lived there virtually his entire life and has always been surrounded by music. His father Sammy was a trumpet player who led a band called The California Rhythm Rascals. “There was always music. He had a couple rehearsals a week and when I got to be a [teenager] there was the radio all the time. We had a great jazz station, KLON [now KKJZ], at that time. My dad started me very early, at three or four years old, tap dancing, from there to the piano and then the clarinet and saxophone.”

As a teenager, Franklin played baritone saxophone in the Los Angeles Police Department Junior Band. That band was sponsored by the L.A.P.D. You got to meet musicians from around your age from all the different high schools and junior high schools and we would rehearse every week with the orchestra and do a couple parades a month. We played for all the public events [and did] the Rose Parade a couple times. It’s a shame they don’t have it anymore. It was really enlightening.”

Although he was always taking lessons and playing an instrument, he was never really happy with it until he discovered the bass in high school. “I had put in my notice and Willie fired me too at the Franklin on the spot. “That was so great, man. ‘Cause I had put in my notice and Willie fired me too at the same time and in the audience Masekela came to me thank you very much and he offered me a job. We went out there almost four years, traveled around the world, made a lot of money and had a lot of fun.”

Franklin performed with Masekela at the Monterey Pop Music Festival in 1967. “That was completely different for me [laughs] man, I was listening to Miles and Trane and Monk and I come to this festival, man, with millions of people and Otis Redding and Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix - I got to meet all of them - and people are going mad and everybody’s getting high and smoking weed and some people got clothes off. It’s just a whole different scene.” The following year Franklin had a number one single with Masekela called “Grazing in the Grass.” “We moved on up, from coach to first class on everything...moving on up to better hotels and we did better gigs, more concerts, Avery Fisher Hall and Carnegie Hall, you know. I was 27, 28, on top of the world, man. It was big for a long time then we went back to coach and back to cabs again [laughs] ‘cause we never did get that second hit...to stay up there. It was a wonderful year.”

Soon after Franklin joined pianist Gene Russell’s trio, who became one of the founders and producers of Blue Note Records. “Sometimes Carvin right around this time and they made their first European tour with Hawes and recorded a few albums. “Can’t remember how I met Michael, but we became friends right away, started doing a few gigs around town together and then he moved into my house. Then I got a call to go with Hampton Hawes who needed a drummer so, of course, I recommended Michael. Hamp was very loose, he wanted us to express ourselves and he wanted the band to be loose. We stayed over there for three months. Playing with Hamp was very prestigious because the Hamp was the man, you know? He knew all the musicians and all the musicians loved him and appreciated him.”

Sometime between meeting Carvin and going to Europe with Hawes, Franklin met Carn. Franklin had recorded the first Black Jazz album with Russell, New Direction. Franklin and Carvin appeared on the label’s third release, Carn’s tour de force, Infant Eyes, before Franklin got to make his own. “I kept telling Gene I wanted to record my band, because we were working around L.A. and it was a bit of a matter. So, Gene said, ‘Sure!’ I got my favorite guys that I’d been working with for a year or so.” Franklin released The Skipper in 1972 and The Skipper at Home in 1974. He went on to release about 23 more albums as a leader and has over 150 album credits.

In 1973, when the original The Three Sounds disbanded, Gene Harris started a new trio with Franklin and his old friend Carl Burnett. Since 2017

(Continued on Page 11)
When hip-hop group A Tribe Called Quest made its second album, The Low End Theory, in 1991, jazz was prominent in the mix. And that expansiveness helped to create a whole new genre of alternative music. Today, the group’s DJ and producer, Ali Shaheed Muhammad, is working with music producer and film scorer Adrian Younge to keep jazz alive via the new Jazz Is Dead label. Actually, says co-founder Dru Loejo, the Los Angeles-based Jazz Is Dead is more of a multi-media happening, combining the records with—COVID permitting—a record store, live shows and performance video.

The concerts, many of them by artists such as Robert Glasper and Kamasi Washington, began in 2017 and the other enterprises have grown from there. Jazz Is Dead’s formula takes legacy artists—such as Gary Bartz, Doug Carn, Jean Carne, Roy Ayers and Lonnie Liston Smith—into the label’s studio (fully equipped with vintage equipment) to work with hand-picked younger musicians, as well as Muhammad and Younge. The results may be slightly outside the jazz purist’s comfort zone, but they’re always interesting. And the records sell and the audiences turn out.

First, that provocative name. “It’s meant to elicit a response,” said Loejo. “It’s a call to action. You either love it or hate it. We have irate people who see our sign coming in and saying, ‘Jazz isn’t dead!’ But then they stick around and listen to the music we’re making.”

Two names came to mind: Fillmore East and West music impresario Bill Graham—who put jazz and rock artists on the same bill—and producer Creed Taylor, who launched both Impulse and CTI. Loejo is a student of both men’s work. CTI not only packaged jazz beautifully, it also leveraged the music with strings and other sweeteners. Jazz Is Dead’s records do the same thing and also employ female vocal choruses. But the soloists play their own music, as they’ve always done.

Carr, who made a strong impression with a string of six albums on the Black Jazz label featuring the five-octave voice of his then-wife, Jean Carr (later, Carne), said he was surprised to find himself recording with hip-hop players but he went with the flow. “They didn’t want me to use my band,” he said. “I never would have made a record like that (JID005), but it turned out better than I thought it would.” Carr said he was appreciative of the opportunity—which he said paid well—after seeing a lot of classic jazz tracks get sampled by rappers. The recording session was complemented with live gigs in the L.A. area, also welcome. Jean Carne hasn’t done much jazz since those albums with Doug but recorded an album for Jazz Is Dead that’s not yet released.

The label has so far released six albums (LP and CD), one of them a compilation. And it’s recording prolifically, including an album with keyboard player Smith, another spiritual jazz stalwart remembered for his work with Pharoah Sanders. Smith’s album with Jazz Is Dead is scheduled to come out in 2022. “It was great working in their studio, with equipment I remember from back in the day,” Smith said. “I didn’t write any songs for the project, so it will be interesting to see how it comes out. I see where they’re coming from.”

Some artists, like saxophonist Joseph McCarney, adapted to the new genre almost effortlessly. “Adrian and Ali are consummate students,” Loejo said. “We all love jazz music. Our original idea was to put together master concerts with a young core band and bring in four or five legacy artists to perform, kind of a mini touring festival. It’s now on a streaming platform because of COVID, but we keep expanding our vision.”

For more information, visit jazzisdead.co

Hopeful Things

by Suzanne Lorge

Pianist David Budway and his wife Brianne Higgins, owners of Maureen’s Jazz Cellar in Nyack, NY, had been planning to fill the itinerary with vocalists for all of January. In normal times, the five-year-old venue hosts an eclectic mix of music and entertainment: nowhere else will you find jazz headliners on the same venue listing as Dead Heads and drag queens. But last month Budway wanted to honor the memory of his sister Maureen, a jazz vocalist and educator who passed away in January 2015, by booking the likes of Sheila Jordan, Jay Clayton, Janis Siegel and Paul Jost. New shutdown orders in New York State scuttled these shows, however. Also on hold, for similar reasons, are Budway’s plans for a series of live albums recorded at the club. The first of these—singer Tania Grubbs’ Live at Maureen’s Jazz Cellar—did make it to disc.

These 12 tracks, recorded on Memorial Day weekend 2019, recall those healthy, halcyon days with tunes that celebrate nature (Billy Strayhorn’s “A Flower Is A Lovesome Thing”), winged creatures (Jimmy Rowles-Norma Winstone’s “The Peacocks”, Leonard Cohen’s “Bird On A Wire”) and the feelings they inspire (Joni Mitchell’s “Love”, Horace Silver’s “Peace”). Grubbs’ velveteen vocals on these cleverly curated, artfully executed songs warm the heart and her original music—a bright samba arrangement of poet Emily Dickinson’s “Hope Is A Thing With Feathers”—inspires all the sentiment the title promises.

Budway and Higgins, though whipped around by shifting regulations for live venues, have consistently offered music at Maureen’s in some way or other over the many months of the public health crisis. Jordan and her regular duo partner, bassist Cameron Brown, plan to keep their Jan. 30 date. This concert will be available via live-stream (and archived) on the club’s website and Facebook page—without charge, courtesy of the club. Grubbs and her husband, bassist Jeff Grubbs, play in a similarly sparse duo format each Sunday and these performances, too, are viewable via the club website and Facebook page, as well as on Grubbs’ own page. In February, Grubbs says, they’ll be concertizing inside their Pittsburgh home, but by March the weather should be warm enough to broadcast again from their porch before a socially distanced audience on the front lawn.

Newark-born saxophonist Janis Siegel just released Mazel (s/t), a dozen Yiddish songs in jazz settings, arranged by pianist John DiMartino and sung in duet with cantor Daniel Kramer. This happy album, sponsored by the North Shore Jewish Center, transmits all of the inherent loveliness of traditional Jewish music without sacrificing any of Siegel’s sophisticated swing. The guest artists, too, impress for their jazz chops: vocalists Amy London, Emily Bindiger, Kevin Osborne and Aubrey Johnson.

Johnson also guested on This Is Our Environment (Next Level), the debut album of saxophonist Joseph Herbst’s forward-looking sextet. Herbst uses musical narrative, open vocals and spoken word to draw attention to human fallibility regarding the demise of the natural world. It’s a distressing theme, to be sure, but the music is not: the album concludes with an exuberant brass send-off—an incentive to do better, perhaps.

This year, we will miss singer Freddy Cole (1931-2020), whose annual Dizzy’s Club Valentine’s Day show set the standard. Two of Cole’s albums with DiMartino received Grammy nominations for Best Jazz Album—Freddy Cole Sings Mr. B in 2010 and My Mood Is You in 2018, both for HighNote. The latter was Cole’s last release, and just to hear “I’ll Always Leave The Door A Little Open”, a bit of hope nestled in nostalgia. And to hear DiMartino contemporaneously this Valentine’s Day, visit Jazz on 38, a live-stream from the Four Seasons featuring vocalist Lizzie Thomas.

Smith’s impression is that the Jazz Is Dead producers will piece the music together the same way Teo Macero did on Miles Davis albums like Bitches Brew and On The Corner (which has Smith’s keyboards). “They’re well organized,” he said.

One of Bartz’ albums with the Mizell Brothers was used by A Tribe Called Quest for a sample. More than a dozen other hip-hop artists have sampled Bartz. His Jazz Is Dead album (JID006) epitomizes the ethos behind Jazz Is Dead,” Younge said. “He’s a luminary who has contributed so much to music culture, for decades. His musical ability is expanding with age and we’re honored to be a part of his world.”

Jazz Is Dead also recorded with the Brazilian jazz trio Azymuth (JID004), notable for using electronic instruments and adding elements of funk, psychedelic rock and samba to their music in the ‘80s. Younge describes the album as “one of the most interesting rides I’ve ever been on.” He said the bedrock was the group’s original conception, “which we pushed even further for a new generation of record collectors.”

JID003 is an album with another Brazilian, samba and Sergio Mendes veteran Marcos Valle.

Lojero and Jazz Is Dead are in touch with what modern audiences want, as are the label’s producers, “Adrian and Ali are consummate students,” Loejo said. “We all love jazz music. Our original idea was to put together master concerts with a young core band and bring in four or five legacy artists to perform, kind of a mini touring festival. It’s now on a streaming platform because of COVID, but we keep expanding our vision.”

For more information, visit jazzisdead.co
STANLEY COWELL
BY ANDREY HENKIN

Pianist Stanley Cowell, longtime musical partner of Charles Tolliver, with whom he founded Strata-East Records, had over two dozen albums as a leader since 1969 including, most recently, Live At Keystone Korner Baltimore (SteepleChase), myriad sideman credits and a professorship at Mason Gross School of the Arts of Rutgers University, died Dec. 17th at 79.

Cowell was born May 5th, 1941 in Toledo, OH. He became interested in piano through exposure to Art Tatum, who was a family friend. After attending Oberlin College Conservatory and University of Michigan and working with Rahsaan Roland Kirk, Cowell moved to New York and began his recording career in 1966, appearing on albums by Marion Brown, Max Roach, Gary Bartz, Jack DeJohnette and, most significantly Tolliver’s The Ringier (Polydor, 1969), as well as waxing his own leader debut Blues For The Viet Cong for the same label three days later.

In 1971, Tolliver and Cowell released the landmark debut of Music Inc. for their new Strat-East label. Cowell described it to our own Anders Griffen in a 2015 interview as, “It was not a cooperative, it was a condominium concept. Charles and I owned the structure, the distribution set up by us over a period with our own recordings and then we began to expand by incorporating other producers and they would assign their product to us to distribute. We reversed the monetary arrangement that companies had; the lion’s share went to the producers.”

Cowell would lead two albums for Strat-East, 1973’s Masa - Ancestral Streams and 1976’s Regeneration, as well as recording over a dozen times as a sideman.


FRANK KIMBROUGH (Nov. 2nd, 1956 - Dec. 30th, 2020) The pianist gained fame as a member of the Jazz Composers Collective (JCC) in the early ‘90s, had over a dozen leader releases since the late ‘80s on Mapleshade, Igmod, Omnitone, Soul Note, Palmetto, ScienSonic, Newvelle, Pirouet and, most recently, Sunnyside (the six-CD set Monk’s Dreams: The Complete Compositions Of Thelonious Sphere Monk); a 25-year tenure in the Maria Schneider Orchestra (appearing on seven albums, including 2020’s Data Lords on ArtistShare with artist and arranger Ole Herrema and fellow JCCers Project and fellow JCCers such as Ted Nash, Ben Allison, Ron Horton and Michael Blake; a long partnership with Joe Locke; sideman credits with Igor Butman, Rich Perry, Kendra Shank, Maryanne De Prohetes, Katie Blue, Noah Preminger, Patrick Cornelius, JohnMenegon, Jack Anderson and others; and a teaching position at Juilliard since 2008. Kimbrough died Dec. 30th at 64.

ED XQUES (Oct. 9th, 1939 - Dec. 4th, 2020) The saxophonist/flutist recorded with Steve Marcus, Melvin Sparks, Thad Jones/Mel Lewis Orchestra, Bill Watrous, Frank Foster, McCoy Tyner, Rich Shermaria, Diane Moser, Joseph C. Phillips, Bill Warfield, Westchester Jazz Orchestra and others. Xiques died Dec. 4th at 81.

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TNYCJR: You could say there’s a difference between those who move for the mere sake of it because they don’t know how to be still and those who have to be still and let the world blossom around them. You can’t be attentive to the spirit, or any spirit, if you’re always on the go, because you’re either too busy talking down to everyone or shutting them out. We need time for cultivation.

LR: I’m doing a piece right now on technology and I keep coming back to this image of Toto pulling back the curtain in The Wizard of Oz. That’s exactly what I see going on. The mask is coming down and there’s desperation out there. We have to be careful with our minds, because the proverbial THEY understand the power of hypnosis based on repetition. Sometimes I hear the classics on the radio and am reminded of how the jazz greats did so much with so little. I’m blessed to have grown up in that time. Not just around jazz, but Black music in general. Gospel, R&B and don’t get me started on James Brown, now he packed the party. As soon as he came on, it was hands up. And if you didn’t have anybody, you just danced with the wall. But you were still telling a story.

TNYCJR: How did this upcoming live-stream concert come about?

LR: One Breath Rising asked me and I said yes, simple as that. Since then, I’ve been going through the pieces in my mind, letting them grow. The fact that it takes place on Valentine’s Day reminds me of a performance I did for the Provincetown Playhouse at the invitation of Regina Res, who teaches story telling at NYU. In that piece, I said I was “looking for an analog love in a digital world”. That notion got me thinking about sound. We’re living in a world of ones and zeros, kicked off with an electrical connection, but I’m used to striking something, producing vibration.

In that performance, for which I both spoke and played, I told the story of my bass, which was built in Germany in the 1840s. It was found in a bombed-out building in Berlin and no one knows how it got there. I had a chance to try it out at the luthier’s shop when I was getting my plywood model fixed. That night, I couldn’t sleep, all I could hear was that sound. I was in love. I ended up trading my bass for the German one. I couldn’t sleep, all I could hear was that sound. I was in love. I ended up trading my bass for the German one. I told a more detailed version of that story to an audience once and at the end of that story, I said, “This is who we are.”

Recommendation: I have to recommend looking into the German concentration camp survivors. They felt such an affinity for my bass, down to the serial number imprinted on the scroll. As I was giving them a closer look, one of the wives was patting and rubbing the bass like it was a real individual, which it is. I got really emotional. They saw a lot of people in that story and told me to keep playing. That’s when I realized the gift ran both ways. You pull in things that so many others take for granted, and you magnify them. This is who we are.

TNYCJR: Speaking of sound, I can’t help but feel like you’re reciting poetry when you’re playing bass and playing bass when you’re reciting poetry.

LR: I’ll walk with that, too. I live an improvisational lifestyle. Whatever I don’t do today, I’ll do the next time.

TNYCJR: Finally, I’d like to go back to the beginning of your relationship with the bass.

LR: I didn’t pick the bass up until I was 30. When I did, I already knew how I wanted it to sound and where I would go with it. Back then, I was getting poetry gigs in Boston when I ran into a bassist by the name of John Jamyll Jones. We were having a Black History Month program and I wanted him to accompany me while I read. The performance was even shown on PBS under the name Say Brother. After that I joined his band, Worlds, reciting poetry and playing a little percussion. They had two bassists, one of whom pursued other paths in life and sold me his bass. At first, I just had it in the living room, but then I would put on John Coltrane’s Ascension and start playing along with it. I felt like part of the band. Jamyll showed me the rudiments: how to hold the instrument and plant my feet properly. Then I got some books on fingering and such. I practiced every night. I just wanted to play. I never met my teachers: Jimmy Garrison, Ron Carter, Paul Chambers and Palle Danielsson. Then, a guy from Berklee who’d heard me play called me about joining him at Wally’s. He needed someone fast, so I took the risk and developed from there. Aside from studying a bit with Cecil McBee, I was largely self-taught. It was always about the music. It saved my life. I was a listener before I was a player and I’m still listening.


Recommended Listening:
- World’s Experience Orchestra—The Beginning Of A New Birth/As Time Flows On (World Productions—Now Again, Now Again, 1975/77)
- Dennis Warren’s Full Metal Revolutionary Jazz Ensemble—Watch Out! (Accurate, 1996)
- Larry Roland—As Time Flows On (Boston Composers Group, 2001)
- Charles Gayle—Streets (Northern Spy, 2011)
- Steve Cohn/Daniel Carter/Larry Roland/Steve Coleman—Voyager (Tube Room, 2018)

Franklin and Burnett have been working in a new trio with pianist Robert Turner, revisiting the foot-tapping positive vibes they felt while working with Harris. This trio recently released a recording of one of their most recent performances from February 2020, Live at the Gardenia Club by 3 More Sounds.

Otherwise, 2020 has been quieter than usual, of course. He’s done a couple record dates and some live -streaming concerts. This new year kicks off with more recording, including an exciting sextet that Franklin has lined up with Nolan Shabed (trumpet), Teodross Avery (tenor), Ryan Porter (tenor), Theo Saunders (piano) and Willie Jones III (drums). He’s worked with them all before separately in various situations. When asked if he had plans to perform with that band he said no. “Those guys are so busy individually I thought if I could get them together once…Willie’s very busy, he lives in New York. Teodross is very busy in L.A. and wherever he’s at he’s got his own thing happening. Ryan Porter plays with Kamasi [Washington] and when they get started they’re going to be on the road all the time. Nolan’s pretty busy with his studio. I don’t think we’re gonna get together again. On an ideal day I’d love to perform with that group, but no plans.”

For more information, visit sperecords.com

Recommended Listening:
- Hugh Masekela—The Promise of a Future (UNI, 1968)
- Henry Franklin—The Skipper (Black Jazz, 1971)
- Henry Franklin—Tribal Dance (Catalyst, 1977)
- Dennis Gonzalez New Dallas Quartet—Stefan (Silkheart, 1986)
- Azar Lawrence—Prayer For My Ancestors (Furthermore, 2008)
- 3 More Sounds (Henry Franklin/Robert Turner/Carl Burnett)—Live at the Gardenia Club (Skipper Prod., 2017)

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We’ve Had Enough!

Fay Victor SoundNoiseFUNK (ESP-Disk’)

by John Pietaro

Fay Victor requires no introduction within New York’s improvisational music sector, her fluid, powerful voice a clarion call to the possibilities of musical emotion. Victor bested the damned virus by releasing We’ve Had Enough! prior to the end of a hellish 2020. She reunited her quartet SoundNoiseFUNK—soprano saxophonist Sam Newsome, electric guitarist Joe Morris and drummer Reggie Nicholson—toward a definitive statement, though one they could hardly have imagined when recording at Firehouse 12 in New Haven months before lockdown. Said statement reaches well beyond the travails of COVID-19, as the title speaks to the state of injustice the planet has struggled through, particularly on these shores, though the issues, upon even precursory inspection, are frighteningly long-term.

In her liner notes, written in real time between October 2019 and July 2020, Victor defines the recording as “a protest record”, concluding the brief but telling diary with “No justice, no peace. Never.” “What’s Gone Wrong?”, a work credited specifically to Victor, which runs just shy of ten minutes, explores the depth of the question, “What’s gone wrong with the world?” Heard initially as a modified madrigal, the phrase is carried through ongoing variations with the instrumentalists commenting, flanking and opposing the vocal melody. Repetition, sure, but treated in a manner that belies the term: Victor appears to cry over whole sections while Morris almost tormenting when not complementing. Repetition, sure, but treated in a manner that belies the term: Victor appears to cry over whole sections while Morris almost tormenting when not complementing. Rearranging the parts of this “scat” without a wink toward its dual meaning expressed in frantic streams. No critic would dare call Victor’s work something akin to a dirge, with its dynamic shifts of pace and volume, its frequent cross-galaxies explorations. Victor appears to cry over whole sections while Morris almost tormenting when not complementing.

Alana Miller

The New York City Jazz Record

Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom

by Kurt Gottschalk

Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom is the kind of movie that’s worth walking into blind. But for the curious cinephile compelled to know what they’re getting into, it’s important to note that it is not particularly a movie about Ma Rainey. She’s in there, but she’s not the subject. The blues legend’s name functions as an adjective in the title and the movie revolves around her, but it’s not about her and Viola Davis—who turns in a fantastic performance as the titular character—is not the performer given the most screen time in the feature.

Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom isn’t a biopic. Rather, it’s a movie about the musicians who made Rainey’s record “Black Bottom” and about the afternoon that record was made. It’s a movie about playing music and talking jive. It’s a movie about Black culture and about hitting bottom and, sometimes, pulling yourself up again. It’s a movie about egos and age and character and conflict.

Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom is a mood piece, an adaptation of the play of the same name that’s thick with cinematic atmosphere. Director George C. Wolfe—who brought Angels in America: Millennium Approaches and Bring in ’da Noise/Bring in ’da Funk to the stage—does a stellar job of putting August Wilson’s 1982 stage play on the screen. Without extending the scene beyond the street outside the downtown Chicago recording studio, Wolfe keeps the story alive. The feeling of the walls closing in comes from the hot afternoon and the mounting character tensions, not from the fact that the narrative never leaves the studio.

The film will be remembered as Chadwick Boseman’s final role and that’s fine because it’s a movie that deserves to be remembered and talked about, whatever gets it there. Boseman—who succumbed to cancer in August 2020 at the age of 43—is remarkable as the upstart trumpeter who’s too cocksure to ingratiate himself to anyone. His arrogance propels the story and Boseman, who went so far as to learn trumpet fingerings for the part, elicits equal parts sympathy and fury. Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom is a powerful movie that, by not saying much, says an awful lot.
The first of the three albums under review here brings the return of the duo that produced the fine 2018 release Radiant Imprints. Saxophonist James Brandon Lewis and drummer Chad Taylor are also two of the busiest musicians in contemporary jazz, recording regularly as leaders, members of other ensembles and sidemen. There’s no accident to that: the two bring strong, distinctive voices to everything they do and a stylistic range that has become a de facto requirement for 21st Century jazz musicians. And no surprise, Live in WilliAus is an excellent album, deeper than the first from the pair and one of the top releases of 2020. The title is a direct and deliberate response and homage to the classic Dewey Redman/Ed Blackwell duo album Red and Black, also recorded live (in 1980) at the WilliAus Jazz Festival. Lewis has a touch of Redman’s keen edge but is otherwise his own man and he and Taylor are also doing their own thing, other than playing a tidy, spirited version of “William” from Red and Black. The two work up a punchy New Orleans strut on that one, but with their own seasoning, which means a generous amount of hip-hop inflections and go-go beats. They also play a pithy, buttery take of Duke Ellington’s “Come Sunday”, with Taylor on mbira, but the rest of the material is all their own, including the opening “Twenty Four”, a revirate of John Coltrane material. The encore, a fantasy on “Somewhere Over The Rainbow”, saves the original melody for the end and stands alone as an invention from Lewis and Taylor. Lewis consistently thrives in a live context, something the two studio albums set into relief. Taylor is behind the drum kit again for Molecular alongside pianist Aruán Ortiz and bassist Brad Jones, but even so there is a mellower quality to the album. In subtle ways, Lewis seems to chafe against the proceedings. It’s not a bad thing and he himself may not be aware of it and it happens even on the uptempo “Helix”, where he seems to be more about something outside of himself than tune. What makes his playing so refreshing and involving is that where dozens of other saxophonists would launch into the type of smeared altissimo passages that have been a signifier of freedom for decades, Lewis looks for opportunities via articulation and finer rhythmic sub-divisions. He’s not searching for emotional fire or catharsis, but some other aesthetic that might be right next door. That makes his playing exciting and satisfying and never pedestrian. Plus, he’s always direct; the hip-hop phrasing he moves in and out of is natural, tough-minded and expressive. The album has something of a sleeper quality, the first listen leaves a good impression, but follow-ups deepen the experience and tracks like the title cut are soulful, passionate and inventive. A real winner.

Orientation of We is a collaborative quartet comprised of Lewis, trumpeter Michael Irwin, bassist Max Johnson and drummer Joe Hertenstein. The manner of their playing on Emergence is related to the Ornette Coleman Quartet, though this group is oriented around riff and clear-cut harmonic procedures. Irwin is an immediate connection, stabbing out concise lead lines and antiphonal responses with more than a little of Don Cherry’s grainy tone. Lewis is not the leader, but the inherent strength of his playing, the muscular passion and searching tone—not for the first time one thinks of Tina Brooks when hearing him—rises above the rest of this ensemble. That’s no small feat, especially with the rock-solid rhythm section. The recording session was back in 2017 and all these musicians have gone on to other things, this may be the last chance in this age when no one can afford to keep a working band together. That’s so small shame, as this one off is full of intelligent, sympathetic interplay and gripping forward motion.

For more information, visit intaktrec.ch and still-off.bandcamp.com. Lewis live-streams Feb. 18th at artsforart.org/onlineasian.html.

For its 23rd film, Pixar has put into the lead role a Black man after, in order (and including sequels), a white toy, bug, monster, fish, white superhero, car, rat, robot, white old man, white girl, dinosaur, Mexican boy and elf. Soul (directed by Pete Docter and written by Docter, Mike Jones and Kemp Powers) is a day-plus in the life of 30-something pianist Joe Gardner (voiced by Jamie Foxx, played by Jonathan Batiste), whom we see in his unfulfilling job as a middle school band teacher, finally getting his break to be in a high-profile jazz group, falling down an open manhole, arriving in some non-denominational pre/post-life and spending the rest of the movie trying to cheat death and return to Earth by counseling 22, an ancient recalcitrant soul (Tina Fey), about the wonders of existence on Earth, finally making it back in time for opening night of the rest of his life.

As such, Soul is the anti-Whiplash, both it and the 2014 Damien Chazelle film featuring teachers putting important life lessons to needy students in the context of jazz. And if the message and audience is wildly different—and no one will confuse Gardner’s wide-eyed wonder with Terence Fletcher’s violent bullying—the use of jazz as a vehicle feels similarly tacked-on. Both movies could have been made about young football players and coaches or graduate students in chemistry and their advisers—or Gardner and Andrew Neiman could have been classical musicians—showing the power and responsibility of the educator on the educatee and how the roles can be reversed. Adding to this is that the music in the world in which Gardner spends much of the movie is scored by Trent Reznor and Atticus Ross, a mild video game-like soundscape rather than, say, Duke Ellington’s Sacred Concerts. And while there are cultural tropes to focus on, as Gardner’s dead musician father and strong single mother or the barbershop as community center, attention was also paid to making these less caricature-like. For those who remember Crayola’s “flesh” crayon, the other Black characters in Soul have a wide range of skin tones, hair types and speech patterns.

Those observations aside, Soul is as pleasant and charming as an Erroll Garner LP. The producers made the effort to have the jazz portions of the film feel authentic: note the fluttering gullet of saxophonist Dorothea Williams (Angela Bassett/Tia Fuller) and angle of attack of Gardner’s fingers on the keyboard or the way that Williams auditions Gardner without telling him what song he will be playing, small details jazz fans will appreciate. A particularly nice character is the adolescent Connie, a budding trombonist mentored by Gardner. Soul is also a paean to New York City, with The Half-Note club obviously patterned after the Village Vanguard; 22 (occupying Gardner’s body) navigating the subway; and cameos by the hapless Knicks and Pinky Rat. Similar to 2009’s Up, the only other Pixar film this reviewer has seen, Soul takes on important questions of existence in a slightly sappy but, ultimately, moving fashion.

For more information, visit disneyplus.com

ON SCREEN

Soul (Pixar)
by Andrey Henkin

For its 23rd film, Pixar has put into the lead role a Black man after, in order (and including sequels), a white toy, bug, monster, fish, white superhero, car, rat, robot, white old man, white girl, dinosaur, Mexican boy and elf. Soul (directed by Pete Docter and written by Docter, Mike Jones and Kemp Powers) is a day-plus in the life of 30-something pianist Joe Gardner (voiced by Jamie Foxx, played by Jonathan Batiste), whom we see in his unfulfilling job as a middle school band teacher, finally getting his break to be in a high-profile jazz group, falling down an open manhole, arriving in some non-denominational pre/post-life and spending the rest of the movie trying to cheat death and return to Earth by counseling 22, an ancient recalcitrant soul (Tina Fey), about the wonders of existence on Earth, finally making it back in time for opening night of the rest of his life.

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In observing Black History Month in the wake of significant socio-political unrest, it helps to remember that the unquenchable spirit and undeniable genius of African American artists who created jazz exemplifies their struggle and triumph in the face of adversity, a struggle still heard in the music.

Drummer Asher Gamedze hails from Cape Town. His debut Dialectic Soul is with trumpeter Robin Fassie-Kock, tenor saxophonist Buddy Wells and bassist Thembinkosi Mavimbela, plus guest vocalist Nono Nkoko. “Dialectic” here refers to the African struggle for identity and power in the face of colonialism and its aftermath, heard in the music’s perpetual motion, even at its gentlest moments, as animated bass and drums buffer slow-moving themes.

Opener “State of Emergence Suite”, almost 19 minutes long, is notable for organic transitions between diverse moods and textures. “Siyabulela”, featuring Nkoko, is a calming, intimate hymn; “Interregnum” a free-swinging accompaniment to (English) spoken word; “Eternality” boasts fine bop-tinged horn solos. “The Speculative Fourth” closes the set with a light, catchy tune buoyed by a Cape Town beat.

To Know Without Knowing is the second collaboration by Ethiopian vibraphonist and father of Ethio-jazz Mulatu Astatke and Melbourne-based nonet Black Jesus Experience. It too mixes politics and spirituality. In “Living On Stolen Land”, for example, vocalist Vida Sunshyne bemoans the Maori people’s estrangement from their lands, followed by MC “Monk” Monkhouse’s rap on the foresaking of ancient sacred ways, all underpinned by raff-ethnic Ethiopian melodies, chromatically enhanced modal harmonies and club-friendly rhythms. On the title track, Monkhouse speaks of greed for oil and gold — our ego eating up our accomplishments to (English) spoken word; “Eternality” boasts fine bop-tinged horn solos. “The Speculative Fourth” closes the set with a light, catchy tune buoyed by a Cape Town beat.

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LIVING AS WE NOW DO IN A WORLD THAT FEELS ORPHANED FROM ITS ANCESTRAL HISTORIES, THERE’S NO MORE APPROPRIATE SPACE TO CRY OUT FOR RESURRECTION THAN THE WOMB-LIKE EXPANSE OF TRADITIONAL NEGRO SPIRITUAL “SOMETIMES I FEEL LIKE A MOTHERLESS CHILD”. SAXOPHONIST ARCHIE SHEPP'S TURN AT THIS SONG WILL SPEAK TO THE HEARTS OF THOSE SEEKING A BRIDGE TO THEIR OWN ROOTS.

In this February 2020 live recording from the Gardenia Club in East Hollywood California, before an attentive and enthusiastic audience, the trio runs through a set of well known popular and jazz standards that jump off the disc. Starting with the Burton Lane composition “On A Clear Day” the trio swings out, led by Turner. He covers the keys with abandon, has formidable technique and uses block chords, cadences and embellishments with a sure-footed spirit of inquiry. Ahmad Jamal’s “Night Mist Blues” is next up with a knock-out groove as Turner digs a trench through the blues theme. Franklin has a terrific solo turn showing he has a soulful instinct and imposing fluency. For the Charles Lloyd song “Sombrero Sam” and the John Lennon-Paul McCartney classic “Eleanor Rigby”, flutist Louis Van Taylor adds fluid coloration to the proceedings. The former has a Latin vibe with flowing rhythmic undercurrents and Van Taylor shows he is an assertive partner in the mix. The latter is a full-blown tour de force running just over 11 minutes. The number is anchored in the rhythm of its pop roots, with Franklin taking an early resourceful turn, before Van Taylor joins the fray. He offers a rough and ready solo in keeping with the character of the arrangement. From start to finish the number is filled with precocious swagger. The Erroll Garner opus “Misty” is a perfect fit for the pianistic talents of Turner, who delivers a lovely lyrical take on the theme by providing evocative harmonic gradations as he ruminates over the keyboard. He fills the arrangement with his big two-handed sound and nimble technique.

The set closes in appropriate fashion with a stellar rendition of the Miles Davis standard “Milestones”, with each band member getting a chance to strut his stuff. Burnett opens the frame with an extensive and bustling workout. Turner then states the theme using his fluid technique to show his command of the material and Franklin takes the number to a close with his clean big tone and nimble playing.

Tenor saxophonist Frank Lowe was a force from the ’70s through the end of the century (and a bit beyond) before his untimely demise and the way his sound and style evolved left an important mark on the world of avant garde jazz. Make no mistake: Lowe could be as intense and wild as they come, but he also exhibited a love of the jazz tradition and some of his best work came when he worked in small groups with fellow giants such as trombonist Joseph Bowie, cornet player Butch Morris and violinist Billy Bang. Lowe was an exciting performer and while John Coltrane exercised a considerable influence on his playing, over time he shifted, never giving up his ability to thrash and burn, but focusing more on melody and longer syncopated lines. His music was full of surprises.

For more information, visit archieball.com

For more information, visit sprecords.com

For more information, visit mahakalamusic.com
Slipknots Through A Looking Glass
Eric Revis (Pyroclastic)
by Eric Wendell

On Slipknots Through A Looking Glass, bassist Eric Revis offers up a collection of songs beautifully displaying his penchant for finding groove in avant garde setings. Essayed by pianist Kris Davis, tenor saxophonist Bill McHenry, alto saxophonist Darius Jones and drummer Chad Taylor (drummer Justin Faulkner on two selections), Revis’ compositional aesthetic finds the emotional counterpoints in the human condition.

Beginning with “Baby Renfro”, an insistent bass groove mixed with prepared piano shows a heightened sense of determination. The song shows the group at its funkiest, knee-deep in a firm structure for the group to play off. The puppy noir of “Earl + The Three-Fifths Compromise” is an early highlight as Revis holds down a solid foundation while McHenry and Jones weave in and out of each other’s melodic characters.

The through-line of the record is the three separate parts of the title track. “Part 1” haunts your ears with two bass tracks played in stereo while a squealing saxophone is faintly heard in the distance, creating an evocative feel. This is quickly interrupted by “Shutter”, with a sparse solo piano introduction that is forlorn eighth note feel setting the stage.

While Revis’ groove, McHenry’s snarl and Jones’ bite are praiseworthy, it’s Davis that makes the sound of the group what it is. This is evident on “ProByte”, with a sparse solo piano introduction that is forlorn and melancholic. Reflective without being reductive, the song slowly builds to higher and higher peaks. “House of Leaves” is the group at its most abstract, a sparseness running on the tightest of ropes. Davis is especially adept at keeping the dialogue moving.

The album ends with the final part of the title track, a multi-instrumental bass climbing and crawling over one another in a subtle battle royale.

Much like the title may suggest, Revis’ music reflects a tireless stalwart since the late ’60s. Less aware critics have described him as a “leader” among his flock, but rarely if ever has Carter given himself such a designation, even while at the helm. What makes this artist so unique, beyond his mastery of woodwinds and moving performances on trumpet, piano and more, is a burning enthusiasm to seek out new voices and experiences. To Carter, the act of creating music with others is sacred, whether with a respected elder of renown or a promising youth with that special spark. He is persistently on the lookout for the latter and, with such tenacity, always in good company.

XNN, a quartet with saxophonist Ben Cohen, pianist Eli Wallace and drummer Dan Kurfirst, is one of those gatherings that would be advised to remain together as a working unit, so vibrant is its community of ideas. From the opening evocative feel, the notes of section 1 (Dance Chaos Magic is one improvisation with several brief tacts), the band demonstrates the strengths adherent in music so purely improvisational. Carter’s instruments—soprano, alto and tenor saxophones, clarinet and trumpet—paint lines at once celebratory and lamentative, gently casting melodies that fit within Cohen’s tenor counterpoint. Founder of record label Eschatology, which released this recording, Brooklyn transplant Cohen is part of a thriving underground that includes large concert series Outskirts and the band Johnny Fuck-Face’s Music for Children (gotta love that). Wallace is co-director of Outsinks and has also made music with the likes of Billy Mintz and Ingrid Laubrock while Kurfirst has performed globally, his rhythmic focus reaching just as wide. Together, they dislodge music to be remembered. The album doesn’t so much explore a soundscape as carry the listener onto one. In the work’s latter part, the horns embrace one another passionately as piano moves through levels of preparedness (from strings fully muted to only partial pizz) and Kurfirst cultivates the storm with care, playing a kind of metallic pedal point at the center of his drumkit.

Dance Chaos Music
XNN (Eschatology)

Ekstre + Daniel Carter (Noncept)
Pandemic Duets
Daniel Carter/Stephen Gauci (Gaucimusic)
by John Pietaro

The name Daniel Carter is mythic among New York’s free jazz crowd as a tireless stalwart since the late ’60s. Less aware critics have described him as a “leader” among his flock, but rarely if ever has Carter given himself such a designation, even while at the helm. What makes this artist so unique, beyond his mastery of woodwinds and moving performances on trumpet, piano and more, is a burning enthusiasm to seek out new voices and experiences. To Carter, the act of creating music with others expand this into carefully constructed call-and-response (4), there is the moving flute and clarinet pairing that defies both tonality and stereotype. As is the case with most Carter collaborations, there is a powerful awareness of every surrounding and this makes for great strength in the duet. By selection 7, alto streams an elegy against tenor pulsations, still, the instrumentalists are never at odds with the other’s work. If anything, the divergent paths they encounter are assets of thriving.


Bebop Fairy Tales: An Historical Fiction Trilogy on Jazz, Intolerance and Baseball
Mark Ruffin (Amazon Books)
by Marilyn Lester

40 years in radio (author Mark Ruffin is the afternoon drivetime DJ for SiriusXM’s Real Jazz channel), 30 years of writing experience, a passion for baseball and plenty of inspiration are the anchors of Bebop Fairy Tales: An Historical Fiction Trilogy on Jazz, Intolerance and Baseball.

Readers will be entertained, informed and often amused by Ruffin’s direct, no-frills style of writing. He’s an able storyteller with an ear for dialogue and the ability to pack color into an economy of words, all the while hitting hard on themes of intolerance and injustice. Timely and sometimes raw, Ruffin never gives up on positivity: perseverance wins the day.

Via a tried-and-true literary device, the three tales in 220 pages place real people—and authentic facts about them—into creatively imagined circumstances, within the framework of the bebop era. And what better way to address injustice, racial and otherwise, than through jazz, a musical form long associated with the concept of freedom and equality?

Each story is cleverly named after a classic jazz tune, inspired by its composer. In “The Saturday Night Fish Fry” (Louis Jordan) jazz saxophonist Gene Ammons and Broadway director/choreographer Bob Fosse meet in New Orleans in the late ’40s and, over two days of raucous exploits, some hard truths are revealed. “Round Midnight With The Ku Klux Klan” (Thelonious Monk), set in 1957 in Mississippi, follows the bullied and effeminate protagonist who meets the pianist in New York with life-changing importance. “The Sidewinder” (Lee Morgan), set in Philadelphia from 1964-80, parses the relationship between a Black boy and a Jewish boy from opposite sides of town. It’s a history-packed story that’s also a valentine to the City of Brotherly Love.

In an interview about his book, Ruffin declared, “intolerance is stupid”. Bebop Fairy Tales: An Historical Fiction Trilogy on Jazz, Intolerance and Baseball makes that case and much more quite definitively.

For more information, visit markruffin.com
Nicely recorded work from the late Detroit-born bebop pianist Tommy Flanagan is always welcome. His career spanned more than 50 years (including gigs with Charlie Parker as a teenager). Flanagan’s Shenanigans, originally issued in 1994, is a useful 70-minute memento of an ambitious gig Flanagan played in Denmark in 1993, celebrating his win of the Jazzpar Prize, which was an annual Danish jazz prize founded by trumpeter Arvnvid Meyer and existed from 1990-2004, the winner getting 200,000 Danish Kroner. (The liner notes say the album was recorded in 1996, but this is apparently a typo.)

The pianist is featured in front of a large and enthusiastic audience playing as a trio with the Danish bassist Jesper Lundgaard and drummer Lewis Nash; in a quartet adding Jesper Thilo on tenor saxophone; and with the Windtet: Henrik Bolberg Pedersen (trumpet), Vincent Nilsson and Steen Hanson (baritone horn), Jan zum Vohrde (alto saxophone, flute), Uffe Markussen (tenor and soprano saxophone, bass clarinet) and Flemming Madsen (baritone saxophone, bass clarinet). Flanagan, who died eight years later, sounds great on all of it.

For more information, visit storyvillerecords.com

The trio material is quite fine. Thad Jones’ “Let's” is a tricky, up-tempo number, which retains the pianist’s trademark lightness of touch. Flanagan and Nash play like they’re glued together and Lundgaard’s fleet solo demonstrates he should be better known outside Scandinavia. Jimmy Van Heusen-Johnny Burke’s “But Beautiful” is, as it was for Johnny Hartman, lyrical and wistful. Ditto Tom McIntosh’s “The Balanced Scales”, another ballad.

The pleasantly jerky midtempo title piece, dedicated to Flanagan, is by late Memphis pianist James Williams. It’s bright and busy and everyone shines, including Lundgaard who gets another solo. Dizzy Gillespie was on Flanagan’s mind, because he died earlier that year. The trio’s tribute is an extended 12-minute version of “Tin Tin Deo” that’s gleefully shape-shifting and percussive.

Thilo comes out of Coleman Hawkins and is quite relaxed and assured in his showcase, Quincy Jones’ “For Lena and Lennie”. The three large band pieces, all of them Flanagan’s own, are deftly arranged by Ole Kock Hansen. The laid-back “Beyond the Bluebird” has some strong ensemble writing. “Eclipsyo”, which John Coltrane recorded, combines calypso and Latin influences in its engaging head. Some of the horn work is slightly off-mic, but the trumpet comes through loud and clear.

For more information, visit storyvillerecords.com

Saxophonist Pharoah Sanders is firmly associated with the “spiritual, ecstatic” jazz of late John Coltrane and Alice Coltrane, as a prominent member of the jazz avant garde in the 60s, when he was still in his 20s. But there is another side to Sanders, one highlighted on this two-LP audiophile reissue of a CD he made with a quartet in 1990 for the Dutch label Timeless. Sanders had been adding classic and contemporary pop songs/standards to his repertoire for a decade when he recorded this music with his working quartet of William Henderson (piano), with Sanders from 1981-98), Stafford James (bassist for Sanders in 1989-90) and Eccleston W. Wainwright (drums). This all-ballad album is a homage to Coltrane’s 1962 Ballads album on Impulse!

The parallels to Coltrane are evident. Sanders’ approach to ballads mirrors that of his former boss, from affectionate limning of the melodies, often with just piano accompaniment at first, to warm, restrained improvisations, then the fire and intensity found in Coltrane and Sanders recordings together. Then there’s the repertoire: three of the songs here—Gene DePaul-Dan Raye’s “You Don’t Know What Love Is”, Frank Loesser-Jimmy McHugh’s “Say It Isn’t So” and Jimmy Van Heusen-Phil Silvers’ “Nancy (With the Laughing Face)” — are also on Ballads.

If you only listened to the first three sides of these two discs, you’d be right to think it is little more than a sincere, dedicated tribute to Coltrane’s ballad playing. However, the final side of the second disc is distinctly Sanders, mainly the first two tracks. J.J. Johnson’s “Lament” is given an almost somnolent treatment, opening with solo piano followed by arco bass before Sanders, on resonant soprano, brings on the melody to take it out. The Sanders original “Bird Song” is a six-plus minute a cappella tour de force for his composer on tenor, applying the techniques of his avant garde skills, including over-blowing, overtones and circular breathing, in the service of creating a masterful improvisation. The side ends with a take on John Blackburn-Karl Suessdorf’s “Moonlight in Vermont” that suggests Sanders was well acquainted with Stan Getz’ version.

For more information, visit tidalwavesmusic.com
This excellent release went somewhat unnoticed, owing in part to the attention given to the nearly contemporaneous appearance of *Palo Alto* last year, but Monk fans will find this previously unissued date extremely rewarding in its own right, provided they can find it at all; it came out as a limited-release LP and may already be hard to track down.

The concert was recorded in Brussels during a European tour that Monk nearly didn’t make (he complained that his hand hurt and had to be enticed out of bed on the day of departure). It was among the last recordings of what we could call the first edition of the “classic” Monk quartet with tenor saxophonist Charlie Rouse, bassist John Ore and drummer Frankie Dunlop. *Palo Alto*, though few reviewers mentioned the fact, seems to be the very last recording of the last classic lineup. In both cases the group was very comfortable with the material they played night after night, but still inspired by it and finding new ways to expand on it.

Dunlop is the big difference maker between the first and later classic lineups. A unique stylist who combined the driving swing of the big band era and the unpredictable accents of bebop, Dunlop is considered by many the perfect drummer for Monk. Not that Ben Riley wasn’t an entirely worthy successor; the latter’s more subtle touch added crucial shading to some of the group’s greatest recordings (*Live At The It Club*, e.g.), but Dunlop did have something special and we really hear it at Palais des Beaux Arts. He even gets an unaccompanied solo track.

The sound quality is excellent and that makes it a perfect companion to the superb 2018 Gearbox release *Mank*, which was recorded in Copenhagen four days earlier. Even the fact that “Bye Ya” and “Monk’s Dream” were played at both concerts is a plus, since the performances are so utterly different.

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For more information, visit tidalwavesmusic.com

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For more information, visit resonancerecords.org

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For more information, visit donnetcherrymusic.bandcamp.com

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For more information, visit vervemusicgroup.com
The Music of William Parker / Migration of Silence Into and Out of The Tone World (Vol. 1-10) by George Grella

A 10-CD boxed set in today's marketplace nearly always means some kind of retrospective compilation of an artist's substantive career. But in the case of bassist, composer and bandleader William Parker, Migration of Silence Into and Out of The Tone World is just a document of his ongoing music-making, a window into a prolific career as one of the centers of a spirit in modern jazz. In terms of size, this is not Parker's first project of its kind; the 2013 Wood Flute Songs was an eight-CD collection of live recordings of various ensembles. That early set, in relative comparison, may be an on-the-fly look at a working musician while this one is very much a demonstration of Parker's current multiple paths and endeavors and, while not a summing up, is a substantial statement toward a definition of just who Parker is today.

The original release date was delayed, so now Migrations appears coincidentally with Duke University Press' publication of Universal Tonality: The Life and Music of William Parker by Cisco Bradley. Like the music, the book is a monograph, a statement on and analysis of the artist that is based on his biography but sees his work as a process. The emphasis in both music and writing is one of philosophy over praxis. This set is packed with music and also concepts, the latter primarily exploring Parker's relationship to text and musical composition. After taking in all the music, one initial response is that it seems, unexpectedly, incomplete. One reason for this is an instinctive response to holding a box (any box), a neat, geometric container defining the limits of what's inside against what couldn't fit in. The container carves an abstract, intuitive world out of the real world, a world which is profoundly than does a CD case or an LP jacket. And the subtitle states “Volumes 1-10”, with the implication that there will be more to come.

The other reason is musical: taken as a whole the 10 discs create an accumulation of music that feels unbalanced. Overall, this release is an important statement, not a monument but something better and more vital, merely the work that one of the most important figures in modern jazz is in the middle of – Parker produced 10 CDs because that's what he does as a musician and the quality of the music is mostly very high, with a great amount of success and satisfaction inside. But not everything works or is of the same quality and Parker's concepts captured within can be ungratifying and even self-defeating. And Migrations cannot answer the question it itself could not anticipate – recorded through the first half of 2019, the music offers no clue to what Parker can and could turn out. The whole project is that Parker's poetry is quite listenable because he's so good at shaping melodies and phrases in his composing, he raises the level of the words more than they deserve.

This material, and much of the set, is obviously squarely in the tradition of political/protest jazz. Musical poetry is notoriously difficult to pull off as music and jazz that works as such is indelible in the heart – We Insist!, Attica Blues, “Fables of Faubus”, “Black and Blue”, “Strange Fruit” – but when it fails it feels like the words wield an iron bar that smashes against the music, rather than an object of performance. Music is mostly not about anything specific, it's a sensation from and for the soul and when words make it about something they need the same artifice of color and shape and metaphor that is the domain of poetry. For Parker’s poetry lags behind his playing and composing. Hearing samples of James Baldwin speaking on The Majesty of Jah drives home the potential power in Parker’s music when met by the right words. This is another high point, an excellent stand-alone album. There is a necessary fire in Baldwin’s words (Parker has an inherent gentleness that is deeply admirable) that is a better companion to the relaxed, focused lope of the music. One of the masterpieces in Parker’s discography is I Plan to Stay a Believer: The Inside Music of Curtis Mayfield and Jah is a companion to the earlier album, hot words and warm, positive soul making not just an unbeatable message, but the kind of music that inspires social and political movements.

This set is a substantial composer’s statement. Volume 2, Child of Sound, is a solo piano album, with Eri Yamamoto playing Parker’s music. Without Parker’s presence, one hears in greater relief what a fine composer he is; there are many lovely, soulful song-like tracks, like “The Golden Light” and a variation on a title track from the Mexican album. There’s a generous 14 tracks, but there are times one wishes Yamamoto was given more space to spin out some deeper improvisations; these are simple heads-solos-head arrangements. A disc of music dedicated to Italian filmmakers like Fellini and Antonioni, with Andrea Wolper singing, is sincere but also disconnected from the spirit and meaning of the films themselves, as if Parker is working from sensations of memories rather than memories themselves.

The final two discs put deeper emphasis on Parker as an organizer of music and musicians, but aesthetically sit apart from the other recordings. The Fastest Train has Parker playing flutes, along with two other flutists, in an extended series of colorful improvisations shaped into a narrative suite. It’s a demonstration of Parker’s “universal tonality” concept, which according to Bradley is a belief that improvisation is a place where all musicians, regardless of heritage, can meet. Manzanar is music for string quartet with added piano, drums, and celesta. It’s a fascinating one but all sounds as if it needs a bit more rehearsal. But these are errors of commission, of a fine musician exploring his tone world, and as a whole this is a new and welcome album in Parker’s discography.

For more information, visit uamfidelity.com.
Jazz has become music without borders. No one thinks it remarkable that three of the most creative jazz musicians in New York started out in Mexico (Antonio Sánchez), the UK (Will Vinson) and Israel (Gilad Hekselman). Sánchez, the biggest name, is Pat Metheny's drummer. He should have won an Oscar for his brilliant soundtrack to the 2014 film Birdman, but his score was ruled ineligible on a technicality. Vinson is one of the most intriguing alto saxophonists to enter jazz in the new millennium. Hekselman is a primary representative of the ongoing “Israeli Invasion” currently expanding the jazz art form.

Their new project, Trio Grande, arrives with high expectations and meets them, although not in ways you expect. Most of what happens here is surprisingly loud, edgy and untamed. These virtuosos are interested in kicking your ass. It starts with Sánchez and his wicked grooves and onslaughts of energy. If there is a breakout on this album it is Hekselman. An outlaw guitar gunslinger lurks in his sophisticated soul. Sometimes he and Sánchez recall John McLaughlin and Billy Cobham. On the latter’s “Gocta” they unleash sublime maniacal fury worthy of the first Mahavishnu Orchestra. “Scoville”, Hekselman’s tribute to John Scofield, makes art from distortion. Yet largely because of Hekselman, the emotional range of this music is wide enough to include rapt, pristine melodicism like “Will You Let It”.

Solo firepower continuously asserts itself. For example, Vinson’s escalating levels of complexity on Sánchez’ “Firenze” are stunning. But Trio Grande is greater than the sum of its exceptional individual parts. These guys are committed to a single ensemble purpose. On Vinson’s infectious ritual “Oberkampf”, the solos of Hekselman and Vinson are vivid treble elaborations within one overarching story. If you just let “Oberkampf” wash over you, you may not notice when Hekselman’s piercing cries become Vinson’s calls. They are the same passion.

This album came out in November 2020, a bright moment at the end of a dark year.

Blue Has A Range
Steve Cardenas (Sunnyside)
by Robert Bush

It’s all about the tone. These days, everyone’s got chops and the ability to navigate difficult meters, but unless a player has command over their personal timbre, all that technical prowess doesn’t amount to much. Steve Cardenas has that tone. It’s a warm and fluid legato and shares qualities of giants like John Abercrombie or Emily Remler while remaining clearly identifiable. On Blue Has A Range, (his sixth date as a leader) Cardenas helms a tight ensemble of John Cowherd (piano), Ben Allison (bass) and Brian Blade (drums). The first thing that grabs the listener on opener “Lost And Found” is Blade’s pristine ride cymbal ping, then the leader’s honey-like tone and the obvious simpatico between Cowherd and Cardenas. Allison is a little buried in the mix, but the overall quartet sonics are quite satisfying. “Blue Language” goes for a sharper, staccato effect, with plentiful chord substitutions from the guitarist, which manage to avoid clashing with Cowherd. They’ve got a great relationship and seem to be able to finish each other’s phrases with ease. An early favorite is “Language Of Love”, a piece like an airy ballad that lingers too long in the ear. Cardenas digs in for an emotional solo blending bluesy asides with modal repetition before the handoff to Cowherd, who responds in kind.

If he had been around in the ’40s, Rossano Sportiello would not only have been a poll winner but also a household name. A superb stride and swing pianist who is versatile enough to fit into more modern settings, Sportiello has his own sound within the jazz tradition. For proof, one listen to his recent solo recital, That’s It!, should suffice although few listeners will want to hear these performances just once.

On superior obscurities, originals and vintage standards, Sportiello is heard in top form. He starts out with a melodic revival of “Smoke Gets In Your Eyes” and his lyrical original “She Is There” and then gets cooking. He strides his way through “Stars Fell On Alabama”, gets hot on “Song For Emily”, brings back “Guilty” (a Richard Whiting gem that is rarely performed) and then stomps on “Fine And Dandy”.

The momentum never slows down even when the tempo does. While Sportiello hints in spots to Teddy Wilson, Fats Waller, Art Tatum and other ’30s greats, he never sounds like a duplicate of any of his predecessors. And of his originals, one could imagine the title track becoming a standard someday along with “Nonno Bob’s Delight”; the latter starts out as a waltz before becoming a hard-slinger with bass lines reminiscent of Dave McKenna. That’s It! is simply one of the finest solo piano albums in recent memory.

For more information, visit arborrecords.com. Sportiello live-streams Feb. 10th at facebook.com/RosannoSportiello.

Allison finally comes to the forefront on “Siguejor”, taking a decidedly Charlie Haden-esque approach where the spaces between the notes are as important as the notes themselves. The band takes it ‘out’ for a minute in the appropriately titled “Signpost Up Ahead” with nervous energy, but the title track is pure melodic bliss. Lots of interplay and memorable melodies bring another guitar/piano tandem to mind—Pat Metheny and and the recently departed Lyle Mays—not a bad comparison and not one made lightly.

For more information, visit sunnysidediscs.com. Cardenas live-streams Feb. 10th at facebook.com/barbayeux.

For more information, visit whirwindrecordings.com. Hekselman live-streams Feb. 4th at jazzgallery.org/tjgline.

That’s It!
Rosanno Sportiello (Arbors)
by Scott Yanow

The past decade has really been the golden age of jazz piano. While most of the early innovators have long since passed, there are numerous brilliant interpreters currently active, probably more than at any time in jazz history, playing creatively in every style.
In some respects these two albums couldn’t be more different. One is a live trio date where Ben Rosenblum leads exclusively from the piano and performs somebody else's music. The other is a studio set from an expandable sextet, with Rosenblum often pulling double duty on accordion and piano while focusing on his own compositions.

The contrast is written clearly through context, but the commonalities—a balance between historical precedent and personal voicings, the use of the same nuanced rhythm core to bring out the best in different situations, an artful coloring of compositions and interpretations with a multihued complexion—also prove obvious. Complementary in every way, these two albums offer a more complete picture of this rising star than either would be able to provide on its own.

Rosenblum is right at home in the trio format, having opted for that setting on his first two albums. And it serves him well on Portrait of the Artist: The Music of Gregg Hill, where he explores the music of the titular Michigan-based composer.

Premiering a fair number of Hill’s pieces on record and given free rein to mold them to his liking with the help of bassist Marty Jaffe and drummer Ben Zweig, Rosenblum finds a way to honor the music and its inspirations while remaining true to his own vision. Mysticism and hints of Bill Evans factor into the title track; the language and muscularity of McCoy Tyner loom large on “Modal Yodel”; and an Ellingtonian grace floats on by during the gorgeous daydreams in “New Sunday”. Not to be left out, Thelonious Monk also receives his due with some quotes during bop-based closer “Thank You Notes”. All at once, Rosenblum minds Hill’s writing, mines the masters and maximizes his own potential.

Kites and Strings, the debut from Rosenblum’s Nebula Project, is something else entirely. It’s a work bent on offering luminous beauty and striking juxtapositions through the use of a colorful palette and the embrace of broad influences.

There’s a bright nod to Cedar Walton with opener “Cedar Place”; an intriguing blend of the leader’s accordion and guest Jake Chapman’s vibraphone during the odd-metered title track; an acknowledgement of classicism’s reach on “Motif from Brahms (op. 98)”; and Klezmer-carnival slant in the zany “Fight or Flight”. Three covers make it into the mix—Leonard Bernstein’s “Somewhere”, Neil Young’s “Philadelphia” and the chorale-like Bulgarian traditional “Izpoved” – but it’s the original music that shines brightest. With a gift for shaping seemingly odd phrases into the inevitable, the smarts to utilize the full textural possibilities offered through his bandmates (i.e. trumpeter Wayne Tucker, reedplayer Jasper Dutz and guitarist Rafael Rosa), a simpatico relationship with Jaffe and Zweig underscoring these performances and his own accordion and piano at the fore, Rosenblum’s personality truly resounds throughout this brilliant production.


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Fred Staton
Photo by Richard Corman
The duo is the most intimate of musical settings—two players, probing, responding, thrusting and parrying, the give and take. One never quite knows where things may end up and that’s part of the appeal. This pair has previous familiarity and make their notes count. Sara Schoenbeck (bassoon) has played with Butch Morris, Yusef Lateef, Joe Morris and Anthony Braxton while Wayne Horvitz (piano and electronics), once one-fifth of John Zorn’s incredible Naked City, has since been a composer and improviser in a variety of contexts. Cell Walk was recorded at two locales: July 2019 in Vancouver and January 2020 in Brooklyn. “Twinning” is a somber ballad, bassoon conveying incredible wistfulness and longing against sparse, dark piano chords. As conducive to a saturnine mood as this is, it’s soon eclipsed by “No Blood Relations”, with subtle Bach-like chords and elegantly pleading bassoon, phrased with echoes of Anglo-American folk motifs. “Ironbound” carries echoes of early 20th Century European classical music, especially Mahler via the bassoon and Debussy and Poulenc via the piano. Despite the snappy title, “American Bandstand” is a pensive near-dirge, its melodic line dripping with angst. The most outstanding track is “The Fifth Day”. Horvitz’ notes are steady but sparse, like a mild spring rain on a metal awning, and Schoenbeck virtually croons in a manner not unlike early ’60s John Coltrane, poetic, passionate, but also with a sense of economy and restraint. “Tin Palace” finds Schoenbeck really going to town, driving the twisty tune the way a postbop saxophonist would while Horvitz provides torrents of sober, determined swing.

If you like soulful reed instruments, wittily self-effacing piano and sonic atmosphere you could cut with a knife, this is the ticket.

For more information, visit songlines.com. Horvitz live-streams Feb. 18th at pdxjazz.com.

NoBusiness Records presents Sam Rivers Archive Project Volumes 1-4
Emanation Sam Rivers trio with Cecil McBee and Norman Connors
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Human Rites Trio
Jason Kao Hwang (True Sound)
by Robert Bush
Violinist/violist Jason Kao Hwang’s trio with Ken Filiano (bass) and Andrew Drury (drums) is one of the most finely honed small groups in the improvised music scene, and, after 15 years together, this album reflects how much progress they have made. The disc opens with the multi-part “Words Asleep Spoken Awake”, a jumpy, disjointed theme where both strings concentrate on the bow while crackling drums pull in a contrary motion. Things get out pretty quickly, but settle into an agitated groove when Filiano shifts into pizzicato while Drury continues to stretch with explosive commentary. The band veers off into a manic swing feel on “Part II”, Hwang executing maximum tension on a solo, followed by a truly monstrous arco exposition from Filiano. Drury concludes by defying all expectations of a typical drum solo: blowing air through a plumbing fixture to create a sound that could have come from a herd of angry elephants.

Hwang explores strictly plucked textures on the viola for “Conscious Concave Concrete”, initiating a series of dark vamps, which also combine various Korean folk elements. Filiano is one of the finest bassists operating on planet Earth and when he lays down a loping groove on “2 AM”, the gravity sets Hwang into one of his most emotionally satisfying moments of the session. Filiano responds in kind, rock solid with never a hint of a false move and eventually handing off to Drury for a supremely balanced composition. A band doesn’t coalesce like this without considerable chemistry developed through serious history. They deliver their magnum opus on ominously titled “Battle For The Indelible Truth”, a 12-minute explosive dialogue between violin and percussion. It all comes together on the closing “Defiance”, the telepathic interplay, the storytelling, the rotating narratives and the sterling musicianship. Recorded over two days in August of 2019, the album is dedicated to the nurses, doctors and frontline workers who saved so many lives during the pandemic of 2020, as well as the 430,000 lives (and counting) we have lost.

Mara Rosenbloom’s trajectory within New York’s improvisational music community has steeply and consistently pointed skyward. The pianist’s refined instrumental and compositional vision, masterful ear and derring-do has placed her in the upper echelon of accompanists, collaborators and, increasingly, into the role of ensemble leader. After considerable work with William Hooker, Vinny Golia, William Parker, Sam Newsome and her own ensemble, Flyways is built on a change best described as atmospheric.

On Murmuration, recorded in 2019, Rosenbloom is the heart of a threesome with vocalist Anais Maviel (here also playing surdo) and bassist Rasham Carter. As always, the pianist’s hands carve waves of sound, albeit suited to the timbers in her midst.

On the lengthy foray of “I Know What I Dreamed Of” with a lyric drawn from the work of the late poet Adrienne Rich, the ensemble shines in a manner befitting the poet as well as the musician. Renowned for her feminism, LGBTQ and anti-war activism (she received the National Book Award simultaneous to Audre Lorde and Alice Walker), Rich stood as a model for lesbians and all people of conscience; see her Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Institution and Experience (1976) for an important view within.

With Murmuration, Maviel’s extended range and arsenal of improvisation create suits of armor and journalistic probes, reaching skyward as Rosenblom and Carter drop thickets of harmonies across both wordage and soundscape. The pianist, who never allows a moment to pass where a thoughtful musical passage is left undone, unspoken, revels in bass and surdo fulls, which toss motifs over the edge, prompting her only to create further and beyond. This ensemble should be heard at Weil Recital Hall for full effect, its blending of postmodem classical music and organic improvisation carrying that much weight.

Beyond this, other works on Murmuration are brief but telling. The opening themes as well as later pieces inspired by bird calls (some heard on the tracks), another Rich work (“Dream of a Common Language”) and, of course, the trio’s reimagining of “These Foolish Things”, long associated with Lennie Tristano and here dedicated to the beloved, late Connie Crothers. This closer is an intimate modernist statement, played solo by Rosenbloom for her late mentor and a perfect vehicle to close the recording, leaving the listener not only wanting more, but warmly, wanting Crothers.

On Respiration the pianist is in a more traditional setting with the assured invention of her trio of bassist Sean Conly and drummer Chad Taylor. The album opens with a brief improvisation on a theme by Amina Claudine Myers before morphing into a Rosenbloom original, “The Choo”, which calls on memories of later ‘60s R&B-fueled jazz. Here Conly’s forward-moving improvisations aspirate the melodic structure and solo sections (the magic between pianist and bassist does bring on thoughts of the first great Bill Evans Trio; ‘nuff said).

This listen carefully, too, to the reconstructions of Juan Tizol’s noted “Caravan”, a major aspect of the Duke Ellington catalog for decades. Respiration’s fourth selection bridges the immortal theme to a Cotherson-esque fantasy, which is utterly riveting, nearly ten minutes long and nary a moment wasted; modal happenings, atonalities, surdo beats and hypnotic revampings of Tizol bring the ear both back and forward simultaneously.

By the ninth and closing cut, “Caravan Reprise – Keep Marching”, Rosenbloom and company seem to have passed out of the work, built and empowering it for the fight-back of these days. More than anything else, this piece carries the banner of a Carla Bley arrangement, bursting with the essential elements even as it lures the ear into unheard, previously unmapped territory. And, it’s no happenstance that Bley has always and, as recently as 2020, featured themes of social justice in her catalog. How much longer before Rosenbloom stands at the helm of the world’s stage? Anything beyond immediately post-COVID would be criminal.

For more information, visit fresquesoundrecords.com. Rosenbloom live-streams Feb. 19th at kerrytownconcerthouse.com/edgefest.

The bells toll, deeply ominous but somehow transparent, as if trading in forboding for the succeeding celebratory atmosphere. Leading the way is drummer John Marshall’s no-holds-barred tap-and-roll crescendo, just before that now-iconic funky-fresh groove arrives, slammed into gear by Marshall and Roy Babbington’s bass, both locked in for the duration of “Hazard Profile”’s first part as the Soft Machine album Bundles comes to life. More than four decades later, in the distinguished company of soprano saxophonist/flutist Theo Travis and guitarist John Etheridge, Marshall and Babbington reprise that role on this excellent live album, which was recorded two years ago this month by the current Softs lineup in Los Angeles. It’s only one of many moments that bridge the often-un-bridgeable gap between nostalgia and the vigor of spontaneous music making.

In 2018, when the band kicked off its 50th anniversary tour, they brought “Profile” in after a Marshall drum solo. That’s also the case here and it’s a joy to hear the driving force behind so many key sessions having a chance to indulge his gifts for color and impeccable timing complexity. Yet, when Babbington and Etheridge hit that riff hard and Travis floats that soprano saxophone melody over it all, the band’s unique sense of swing, tight but relaxed, comes into sharp focus. It’s present in a very different way on the suite, “The Tale of Taliesin”, carrying the composition along its circuitously repetitive and modal path. Again, Marshall’s constantly morphing snare patterns bring spirit and gentle drive to guide the tune toward its climactic second phase.

To point out solo contributions would be to underestimate this group synergy, but there are many. Babbington’s deliciously understated opening to “The Man Who Waved At Trains” should be a model of the dignified and virtuosic delicacy with which all bassists should learn to approach the drummers. But his expertise judicious use of effect, as on his growly low-register contributions to “Hidden Details”, is also well worth study, as is Etheridge’s perfect use of octave doublings during those crafty webs of scale and motive he spins with the effortlessness of the master at play. Yet, it’s his heartbreakingly understated introduction to “Heart Off Guard”, a crystalline world of subtly contained dynamic contrast, which is one of this album’s finest moments. Another is the intro to “Out-Bloody-Rageous”. To consider Travis only for his excellent windwork is to deny his contributions to the world of looping. The fragmentations, proportions and octave displacements achieved on that Fender-Rhodes-derived loop nest is a marvel to behold, as is yet another tight band entrance ushering in the tone proper.

The mix of old and new tunes is predictable; the unity and vitality with which both are rendered is not. The recording and playing are equal in immediacy and it’s all captured in front of an audience whose appreciation knows no bounds, as their reaction to “Hazard Profile” makes abundantly clear. Live at The Baked Potato is as fine a representation of this band on stage as you’re likely to get without hearing them in person and their spiritedly wise optimism is a sound for sore ears.

For more information, visit moonjune.com
The sundry environs of Germany’s Lake Constance have inspired clarinetist Lajos Dudas, who turns 80 this month, on The Lake and the Music. Dudas uses classical, folk and jazz approaches in the context of a broad range of jazz styles and his 50 Years with Jazz Clarinet (JazzSick Records, 2011) is a delightful career retrospective. Here, Dudas teams with long-time bandmate guitarist Philipp van Endert and drummer Kurt Billker while tapping three bassists, two percussionists and a pair of guests for a pleasurable program of mainstream jazz classics.

Dudas shares a close bond with van Endert and their interplay is at the session’s core. Their connection is obvious on the rocking opener, Richard Rodgers-Lorenz Hart’s “The Lady is a Tramp”, and a lovely send-up of Horace Silver’s “Filthy McNasty”, which gets its chill from bassist Martin Gjakovski and Gerd Dudek’s flute. Dudas also pairs with Dudek’s soprano saxophone for a jaunty version of Gerald Marks-Seymour Simons’ “All of Me” supported by outstanding bassist Vitold Rek and percussionist Janos Szudy. Rek and Szudy are elegant together and gorgeously color Sonny Rollins’ “St. Thomas” and Tommy Vig closer “But I…”

Dudas spends a lot of time in the upper clarinet registers and his control is still amazingly focused throughout but with guest vibraphonist Karl Berger he dips down to the lower register on George Gershwin’s “A Foggy Day”. The highlights are a beautiful portrayal of the deep sadness in Rezső Seress’ “Gloomy Sunday” and a straightahead swinging take on Attila Zoller’s “A Thousand Dreams”. On the former, van Endert and guest percussionist Jochen Büttner artfully set the mood for Dudas’ best emotive playing as he tearfully voices the tune’s despair while bassist Leonard E. Jones and van Endert pep up the latter to support wonderfully fleet clarinet lines.

While not as adventurous as his prior works, Dudas remains a rare musical treasure who has mastered his instrument in a way transcending genre.

For more information, visit jazzsick.com

Don’t Stop The Groove by the Lyman Woodard Organization reissues a LP of a Jan. 26th, 1979 show at Cobb’s Corner nightclub in Detroit. It was the last performance of an era in Detroit jazz: one day later, the owner of the club, Henry Normile, was shot and killed in his apartment and, as the album’s liner notes put it, “the heart of the Detroit jazz scene was ripped apart.” Don’t Stop The Groove is a snapshot of and testament to just how alive that heart had been just a day before.

Woodard, who died 12 years ago this month, and the other musicians of the Organization—Marcus Belgrave and Ron Jackson (trumpets), Kerry Campbell (soprano saxophone), Allan Barnes (tenor saxophone), Robert Lowë (guitar, vocals), Lorenzo Brown (percussion, vocals), Leonard King (drums) and Leroy Emmanuel (vocals)—play with unflagging manic energy for the album’s 32-minute runtime. Woodard’s simple, shimmering organ sound is a joy, as are Brown’s machine gun conga drums and Lowë’s understated but electric electric guitar. The horn section, which includes trumpet heavyweight Belgrave, lets out yes-Lord peaks of notes in perfect time that add exclamation points to the end of each bar. Every player has a perfectly proportioned sense of their relationship to the groove—they fit it like a hand in a glove (or...).

Don’t Stop The Groove is a perfect party album. Though 40+ years old, it has aged like wine into an instant classic of R&B-soul-disco-jazz. Only once does it descend from fantastic to pretty good: on the first track, when the band spends a few minutes chanting “don’t stop the groove, cause it put ‘cha in the mood, don’t stop”. The audience in the nightclub clearly enjoyed it, but on the recording, without the atmosphere of infectious fun everyone at Cobb’s Corner was audibly enjoying on that winter’s night in Detroit, thechanting quickly gets tiresome. Besides that, though, the advertising is true: the groove don’t stop.

For more information, visit purepleasurerecords.com
The trio of The Longrun Development of the Universe has worked together for 20 years. Tuba player Carl Ludwig Hübsch, who turns 55 this month, dedicated this recording to Misha Mengelberg who died in 2017. The CD contains three compositions by the Dutch jazz pianist and composer, with all other tracks by Hübsch. The musicians are well-known improvisers and instrumentalists: Matthias Schubert (tenor saxophone) played with Günter Hennig and Arno Mangelzordi; Wolter Wierbos (trombone) is a longtime member of the ICP Orchestra; soprano saxophonist John Tchicai; and Hübsch has been a sideman with Arthur Blythe, Tomasz Stańko and Lester Bowie.

Tuba, tenor saxophone and trombone is an unusual grouping for a full-length recording. The listener can detect influences of the world of the Dutch improvisational school, New Music and modern jazz. The nine often-lengthy tracks appear mostly freely improvised; there are no melodies and individual solos come and go. The opening Mengelberg composition “De Sprong, O Romantiek” is also lively, spacious and the most gripping of all tracks. Each instrument shines in its own right and instrumental sections alternate with Hübsch’s haunting vocals. Very free and associative, “BroozziRolloKachel” presents the tuba in unusually high registers, a bold musical interplay, a bit disjointed like colliding traffic.

You have to be a true aficionado of experimental and improvisational music and open to surprise and sound combinations not heard before to appreciate this recording. Some of the tracks feel unwieldy, almost inaccessible, and could be more enjoyable in an intimate club setting where listeners can witness the musicians performing their magic on their instruments.

Artblau is more welcoming. Hübsch’s inspiration was trumpeter Miles Davis’s legendary 1959 recording Kind of Blue. He has not set out to rehash but instead to create a new take on the music. With him is a nine-member ensemble of Cologne-based musicians (the North Rhine-Westphalia city is Hübsch’s homebase): Angelika Sheridan (flutes), Salim Javaid (soprano saxophone), Leonhard Huhn (alto), Matthias Muche (trombone), Philip Zoubek (piano), Akiko Ahrendt (violin), Elisabeth Coudoux (cello), Constantin Herzog (bass) and Etienne Nillesen (extended snare drum), plus Pauline Buss (viola on track 12). Hübsch wanted to expose style-forming elements of Kind of Blue and present them in a different, abstract and contemporary manner using decomposition, restructuring and reaction. Traditional jazz is the background, new music and improvisation foregrounded.

The CD also includes compositions by Hübsch and ensemble members interspersed with the Davis tracks. The very brief opener “Go Catches” (Hübsch) is slow, beautiful and deeply felt. Easy-going “Two Freds are Free” (Huhn) features a bass and melody group and ends with twinges of Cannonball Adderley’s saxophone. Other tracks like “Freifeld” (Hübsch), conceived as a reduced and rearranged version of “Freddie Freeloader” (Hübsch), are more challenging and somewhat disjointed.

For more information, visit jazzwerkstatt.eu and impakt-keeln.bandcamp.com

In 2021, Danish guitarist Pierre Dørge celebrates not only his 75th birthday (Feb. 28th) but also the 40th year of his New Jungle Orchestra (NJO). Both are quite considerable achievements, but the latter is a bit more amazing: maintaining a group, which, despite its evolution over time, has stayed true to its initial vision of a ten-piece ensemble playing vibrant music from both the historical and free side of the jazz spectrum, as well as bringing in various African and other world traditions, blended into a seamless whole.

The band started with Dørge, keyboardist Irene Becker and saxophonist Morten Carlsen (who left the group some 35 years later) as the core. The initial membership seemed loose but included some of Denmark and the world’s finest saxophonists John Tchicai (a mentor and whose 1968 MPS album Afrodisia was Dørge’s recording debut), Jesper Zeuthen and Simon Spang-Hanssen, drummers Marilyn Mazur and Hamid Drake, Johnny (bass) and Thomas Dyan (percussion), trumpeter Harry Beckett and bassist Hugo Rasmussen.

By the late 80s the personnel began to stabilize. Of the current members, trombonist Kenneth Agerholm came aboard in 1985, saxophonist Jakob Mygind during the early 90s and reed player Anders Banke in 2000. The crack rhythm team of bassist Thommy Andersson, drummer Martin Andersen and Ghanaian percussionist Ayi Solomon has also been in place since the early aughts. This is a well-seasoned ensemble.

Bluu Afroo is the 23rd NJO album. The program is by Dørge with the exception of two by Becker (“Sister” and “Dancing In The Jungle”). “Mingus’ Birthday Party” begins with a blast and enters into a driving rhythm with lively solos by trumpeter Tobias Wiklund (a new member) and Agerholm. But curiously, the track changes mode in the middle, an accompanied solo by Becker before it concludes with a gauzy interlude and a final orchestral blast.

Ellington is a major influence on Dørge’s music and “Mama Asili” is a fine demonstration. It’s a feature for a guest soloist, American tenor saxophonist Stephen Riley, a fellow SteepleChase artist (producer Nils Winther likes to mix and match the members of the ICP Orchestra and Gerry Hemingway Quintet, plus Pauline Buss (viola on track 12). Hübsch wanted to expose style-forming elements of Kind of Blue and present them in a different, abstract and contemporary manner using decomposition, restructuring and reaction. Traditional jazz is the background, new music and improvisation foregrounded.

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Gary Versace is a special national resource. Just consider: he may be the most in-demand sideman in jazz. Everyone from cimbal Grammy winners (Maria Schneider) to edgy adventurers (Matt Moran) chooses Versace because his presence improves any band. In his discography as a sideman (now around 80 titles), he is mostly called upon to play Hammond B3, Fender Rhodes, accordion and even melodica. In his spare time, Versace leads a world-class acoustic piano trio.

All For Now is his piano trio debut on SteepleChase after four earlier albums and first for the label since 2006. Versace writes captivating songs like “Backs and All”, which begins as a softly circling pool of bright chimings. From this simple opening he extends long strands of melody and countermelody and creates a rich design. When he cuts loose, as on “Two Peas”, he displays chops of extreme ambidextrous pianistic athleticism.

He is also an innovative interpreter. George and Ira Gershwin’s “The Man I Love” is the funkiest on record. It is normally a brooding, even dreamy song, somebody forget to tell Versace. He gives it a heavy bass vamp and a gut-level groove. His piano solo is a joyous celebration, bouncing over all those backbeats. Irene Higginbotham-Ervin Drake-Dan Fisher’s “Good Morning Heartache” is different because Versace’s chord voicings intensify the song’s original poignant intention and his new melodies elaborate on the sadness.

Track eight is a wild free ride that is not obviously Bud Powell’s “Celia” until the end.

There are two kinds of piano trios: those that use the bassist and drummer as accompanists and those that use them as partners. Versace’s trio is unmistakably the latter. It is fitting that this great sideman knows how to use sidemen. Bassist Jay Anderson and drummer Obed Calvaire are beautifully essential. On Versace’s ballad “Ours”, Versace and Anderson play the melody in unison and then alternate solo choruses. Anderson’s variations deepen Versace’s ideas. Versace clears space for Calvaire to insert a crisp, elegant spontaneous cymbal composition into the middle of “Celia”.

For more information, visit steeplechase.dk

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Clarinetist/tenor saxophonist Mezz Mezzrow is notorious in jazz for his marijuana operation in '30s Harlem (Mezz became slang in the use of the drug) and his 1946 autobiography Really the Illust, wherein his self-perception as Negro was laid out in its use of the drug and all this. Overwhelmed his playing, first in his native Chicago and then New York. His last 20 years (he died in 1972 just shy of 73) were spent in Paris, whose Salle Pleyel was his home. His last 20 years playing, first in his native Chicago and then New York. His last 20 years (he died in 1972 just shy of 73) were spent in Paris, whose Salle Pleyel was his home.

The cover captures a moment in time: a historic all-star gig for a concert at Carnegie Hall by pianist Toshiko Akiyoshi. The band comprised members of the Rutgers Institute of Jazz Studies, four years after it was settled permanently in Newark. The leader, splitting time between her native Japan and the US, is joined by husband Lew Tabackin (tenor saxophone/flute) and, straggling as regularly as they do, bassist Lynn Christie and drummer Bill Goodwin, for two Akiyoshi tunes, one a line for solo composer Michio Miyagi and “Lover Man”.

According to keyboard player Wayne Horvitz years after his LP, a document of a concert at One Henry Street, is an edited version of what actually transpired, almost all written material excised from the title piece and “Psalm” because they were too long for the sides of an LP. With that caveat, this is Horvitz’ first release on a “major” label and features him on piano (both acoustic and amplified), organ, synthesizer and electronics, joined in a one-time, convened-for event the gig trio with the late John Coltrane (cornet) and William Parker (bass).