

# DOWN BEAT

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**Chucho  
Valdés**

**Claude  
"Fiddler"  
Williams**

**New Blues  
Invasion**

**branford marsalis  
Art Beyond  
Commerce**



## 16 Branford Marsalis

### *Art Beyond Commerce*

One of our most intrepid and commanding saxophonists, Marsalis has proven that he has little problem burrowing back into his artistic quartet mode after investigating outside projects. But this creative consultant for Columbia Jazz knows all too well that art music infrequently corresponds with commercial success.

By Jim Macnie

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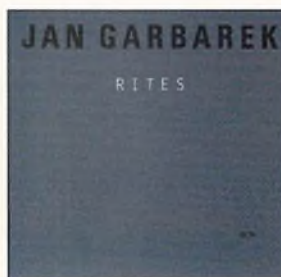


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# Art Beyond Commerce

The wood in Tarrytown's Music Hall Theatre smells great. This venerable space has absorbed a lot of sweat and steam over the years, and both have flavored its inescapable eau d'lumber. Located on a village Main Street just north of New York, the theatre has been around for more than a century, and its floorboards creak really, really well. As Branford Marsalis silently wanders the stage on a winter afternoon, the only sounds in the air are big blasts from the radiators and the occasional squeak from under his heels. Marsalis is no gazelle. When he walks, his steps are emphatic. And when he grimaces, his frustration is palpable.

The look on Branford's face lets the handful of people in the room know he's perplexed. Along with drummer Jeff "Tain" Watts and bassist Eric Revis, he's trying to negotiate the accents of a new tune, and the music isn't flowing as naturally as he would like. He begins the theme's quickly paced eight-note phrase again, and this time around it's Revis' turn to fumble.

"Work on your shit, man. Work on it," says the 38-year-old leader. Though it sounds like a castigation, it feels like a cheer. Marsalis is an encouraging, all-for-one kind of guy, and his advice to the bassist is advice to the group itself. Finishing up his first quartet record in eight years, Marsalis will accept nothing less than the unit acting in full coordination.

by jim macnie



That's going to be tough, though. Kenny Kirkland, the band's pianist and one of Marsalis' best friends, died last November—and his passing came out of the blue. So it's more than a bit weird to be back on stage at this theatre cum recording studio, where several tracks with Kirkland have already been cut. Finishing up in trio what was started in quartet certainly isn't what Marsalis had in mind. "But hey, that's how it is," he says, shaking his head resolutely. "Can't nobody change nothing about it."

The double whammy is the saxophonist swears the group was just getting to one of those sublime musical spots every leader longs for.

"Oh, we were there," he assures, "ready to hunker down and play some serious shit. A lot of the forms I write are somewhat strange, but I've recently found a way to combine melodic simplicity with these crazed chord structures, and that's something I've been working toward for a while. And yeah, Tain was ready, Kenny was ready, no question. We'd had run-ins during the early '80s when I brought in a few tunes, and the guys said, 'Man, this shit sucks.' They couldn't hear it. But just now we were ready to go forward, the language was coming back to us and we were actually pushing past it. Damn, man, damn."

The foursome reached one level of rapport with *Crazy People Music* in 1990; it's a record that strongly suggests vehemence and frivolity can walk hand in hand. Then, in 1992, Marsalis rerouted his career to include a highly



ALAN HARRISMAN

was psyched to get with his boys for some quartet work. This new record, titled *Requiem*, is a follow-up to the artistically fertile but commercially disregarded *The Dark Keys*. Released in '96, it reminded its listeners that Marsalis is one of our most intrepid and commanding saxophonists. It also signaled that he has little problem burrowing back into his art mode after investigating outside projects.

In typical fashion, a mix of concentration and jocularly marks the Music Theatre session. Marsalis has two different laughs: one for when they get it wrong and one for when they get it right. Prior to recording, the band spent time on the road playing the pieces. The leader's thinking was to tighten up the material, then cut it.

"In Seattle this shit was imploding and exploding at the same time," he laughs. "We were way inside the songs, so it was time to record. Usually it's the other way around—roll tape then take it to the stage—and that really hasn't gotten us anywhere for the most part. It's like being in eternal Blue Note hell: one disc being made after the other, and nobody getting past the periphery of the tunes."

Listening to the final version of that eight-note piece, you get an idea of what kind of loose-limbed complexity Marsalis is shooting for. Between Watts' fluid aggression and Revis' limber support, it seems to move according to impulse. Marsalis says the guys originally deemed the piece "Yimple," a play on the word "simple," because it wasn't initially easy to fathom (the track might be

"Art's got its problems. I guess there were times when genius and commerce went hand in hand—*Bird With Strings* would probably be like that. And even then, the so-called hipsters were pissed because Bird played pop."

heralded stint on the *Tonight Show*. While other bands went on to hone their sounds, the quartet played together intermittently, when schedules allowed. Kirkland, who along with Watts followed his pal to Burbank for a stretch, was not only a popular sideman, but had his own gigs to attend to. And Branford's own itinerary can be considered anything but lax. Throughout the decade he spent time leading the panrhythmic groove ensemble Buckshot LeFonque, investigating the trio realm on a pair of remarkable records, and making a duet disc with his dad, Ellis. This year, settling back into New York life after splitting Leno Land, he's taken on another commitment, becoming the creative consultant at Columbia Jazz. The label has provided a home for the Marsalis family musicians since brother Wynton's debut in 1982.

So you can imagine that Marsalis the progressive improviser

listed on the record as "Trio Toon"). And though he says they had previously played a piece called "Lykeif" better than the recorded version, it too captivates by waxing both unbridled and taut.

"We'll get some things rolling, and they'll be totally out," Marsalis offers. "But there's a structure we're adhering to, and that's what makes it cool. Kenny and I know how to go just out enough and then come back in—we're real cognizant of the form, and that gives you something to stray away from rather than just going out and staying out. Of course with us the form itself is always moving."

Peter Watrous, music critic for the *New York Times*, has closely monitored the advances of Marsalis' foursome over the years. "Branford's quartet took the original impulses of Wynton's group and made them freer and looser," he says. "He devised some really interesting tricks as far as improvising and struc-

ture go. The fact of the matter is the late Wynton groups with Branford, and Branford's own bands, from around the time of *Black Codes From The Underground* through *Crazy People Music*, have had a lot more influence on mainstream jazz than anyone's been willing to give them credit for. And Branford's certainly refined it since then."

Marsalis picked up a few notions of how he wanted his music to flow from Keith Jarrett's European Quartet with Jan Garbarek. He says *Belonging* was an inspiration in the way that the melody dictates the tempo of the song. Pieces such as "Lykeif" were also inspired by the highly refined motion of African drum music.

"The place where we Westerners get lost is counting shit," he offers. "Those drum bands don't count. The songs are a combination of rhythms, and each rhythm is its own tempo. They use hand signals or names for the rhythm, and each rhythm is the same tempo all the time. Some stuff will be playing at one tempo, and then switch to another—mind boggling. The rhythm loops until someone says, 'Let's go to the next place.' It's tough to dig a rhythm that's not in a specific two-, four-, five-bar scheme. In our terms it'd be four-and-a-half, or three-and-seven-eighths. That's because there's something intuitive at work there, too. Those are the little things we're trying to get to in our band."

During our talk, it becomes obvious that Marsalis laments the time spent away from such creative endeavors. He alludes to the fact that his *Tonight Show* gig thwarted some of his goals. "Good for career, bad for musical development," he says in synopsis. "Professionally not a mistake, but emotionally and personally, hell yeah."

By most accounts, his return to the East Coast was predicated on family responsibilities. He missed his son, a young teen named Reece. Branford and Reece's mom divorced several years ago, and Marsalis, who is full of great memories regarding his own childhood in New Orleans and his relationship with his father, realized a more active role in Reece's life was a must. Self-chastisement wafts through the air when the subject comes up.

"Going through a divorce, going to work on the television show and leaving my kid 2,500 miles behind? I look at that sequence now and wonder how mixed up I was at the age of 32 to convince myself that was OK to do. Let alone whether or not I *should* have done it. I now understand to what degree people can bullshit themselves to substantiate their quest toward whatever it is they're looking for. If you can leave a 7-year-old behind, you can do damn near anything—believe it. So I had a choice to make: restoring my relationship with my child or being rich and famous. Once I got to the place where I realized that, it took two seconds to come up with the answer. I got the hell out of Los Angeles. And when I got back here, I confronted some other mistakes, too. To be honest with you, as

sad as it is, I'm glad Kenny died when he did, and not earlier. I couldn't appreciate the concept of loss until the last couple years. I wasn't emotionally mature enough to understand it."

Kirkland's collapse was brought about by a weak heart and an overall constitutional frailty exacerbated by neglect and misuse. Marsalis, who first heard the pianist in Boston when Kirkland played with Michael Urbaniak, smiles recalling his pal.

"When I moved to New York, I never really dug the sound of the pianists I heard. I grew up with my dad playing piano at home, and he has a very dense sound—all 10 fingers are at work. When I finally heard Kenny, it was a relief. I went down to New York from Berklee after seeing him in Boston and banged on his door. We spent the day playing. I was playing alto just like David Sanborn back then. We did 'Giant Steps,' and Kenny said, 'Never



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"We've used the term 'burn out' to describe a certain kind of wild tune we played, and Kenny was the king of burn out. Kenny always gave it an all-or-nothing vibe. I'm still in shock over his passing."

heard nobody play "Giant Steps" with the Sanborn vibe—I like you, man.' I told him, 'My brother's gonna start a band, it's gonna be great, we're gonna wear some suits and shit, and you should join.' We were hooked up ever since.

"Doctone, man. The doctor of tones. For the last 20 years, all the way back to Wynton's band, we've used the term 'burn out' to describe a certain kind of wild tune we played, and Kenny was the king of burn out. 'Knozz-Moe-King' is a burn out tune, 'Chambers Of Tain,' too. Kenny always gave it an all-or-nothing vibe. I'm still in shock over his passing."

Somehow it seems daring for a big-assed conglomerate to put an artist in charge of a label's direction, but Marsalis' business acumen isn't meager, and his responsibilities at Columbia have their limits. To a degree, the imprint is merely investing in one of its most valuable hold-

ings: the Marsalis name.

"He's not a suit by any means," says Jeff Levenson, vice president of jazz at Columbia. "And he doesn't fulfill what's thought of as typical executive capacities per se—he's been brought in to provide an A&R direction. And his broad musical perspective is helping to augment our direction."

A redefinition is taking place at the imprint these days. With the major-label competition of Verve, Blue Note and Warner Bros. breathing down its neck, Columbia is currently in flux. A number of artists, including Leon Parker, have left; and a number of artists, including David S. Ware, have been added. Under Marsalis' purview, the administration has signed Ulali, three native American women singers whose a capella harmonies are applied to traditional Indian chants, as well as Sam Newsome's Global Unity ensemble. Marsalis associates Watts and keyboardist Joey Calderazzo have also been added to the roster.

"There's an overriding sense from both Branford and myself that traditional jazz as we know and love it is suffering," Levenson continues. "It's the belief here that in order for jazz to leap into the 21st Century, it's going to have to recruit into its fold what we might call global music or something from a larger world perspective—generally open itself up to other points of view."

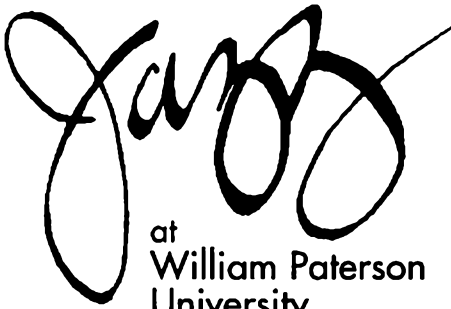
Marsalis, whose own records don't exactly rock the boulevard as far as Soundscan goes, knows that positive cash flow is what keeps heads afloat at a place like Columbia. But he mums up a bit when the conversation turns to contemporary jazz artists like the currently flourishing Peter White and graying sensualist Gato Barbieri.

"They were already rolling before I got here, and that's fine," he says. "But my job is to identify artists who I think can make great music, which basically limits my capacity, because you *have* to have guys who can sell records, and the two are very rarely mutually compatible. So there are lots of things around here that have nothing to do with me. I have my little area, and I'm trying to work it."

It's no revelation to this creative consultant that art music infrequently corresponds commerce-wise with pop. When he and Wynton first signed with the label, they made a point of looking up the sales figures for their favorite albums. Miles Davis' *Nefertiti* clocked in around 35,000. Marsalis laughs as he recalls that eye-opener.

"Wow—one of the best jazz records I've ever heard, and nobody bought it. And *A Love Supreme* didn't go gold until the late '80s, right? So art's got its problems. I guess there were times when genius and commerce went hand in hand—*Bird With Strings* would proba-

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Making a Difference

bly be like that. And even then the so-called hipsters were pissed because Bird played pop."

The uphill battle of marketing such alliances isn't lost on Marsalis. Whatever rose-colored glasses he had about jazz business were wiped clean years ago by one of Columbia's top dogs.

"There was a time when I was typical jazz guy. I blamed the label for not moving the kind of numbers I thought were possible. You know: 'All these guys are doing well, but not us'—you hear that everywhere in jazz. It was Al Teller who straightened me out. He took me aside one day back in the '80s and said, 'Kid, I like you. You got balls. And you're a pretty good musician, too, I figure. But lemme tellya something: No one wants to buy this shit. No one. You wanna do another kind of music, like that Weather Report band we got? I'll give you bigger budgets, see to it you have a chance to make some noise. If you don't, I'm not going to keep you from doing your kind of jazz, but I want you to understand and accept your place in the market, which ain't very big. But it's bad business for me to commit any more money to you and your cause. So think about it.' I loved him for that. He said it so straightforward, there was no argument to be made."

The television in Marsalis' office is glowing with live shots of Clinton's Baghdad bombing, and the barrage of missile fire is a decent analog to the tenor/drums section of "Doctone," a rampage that opens the saxophonist's new disc. Whether blowing fierce or lithe, there's an increased eloquence to his music these days.

"Man, it's fun to make advances. When I think of *Renaissance* and *Royal Garden Blues*, well, they weren't very good records. But it's crazy: That was when I was at my most popular. We were playing this music, and it was palatable to a lot of people outside of jazz. I was playing what I thought was

cutting edge, trying my damndest at age 26. But I knew I had a long way to go. And I knew that the popularity would dwindle, and *that* would be a way to find out if I was really, really onto something musically. When *The Dark Keys* came out and no one bought it, I thought, OK, we're getting close now. What can I say? The records I put out are as good as I can make 'em. And if people don't like it, there's nothing I can do about it. People are usually about 50 years behind the time. Go out and play the music of Charlie Parker: It ain't cutting edge anymore, it's standard stuff. So look out, in 2020 everybody's gonna be saying, 'Ornette Coleman, yeah, I hear that.' And, man, I'll be loving it."

DB

#### EQUIPMENT

Branford Marsalis plays a Dave Guardala tenor saxophone and a Selmer Mark VI soprano saxophone. He uses Dave Guardala mouthpieces and Hemke 4 1/2 reeds on both horns.

#### SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

REQUIEM—Columbia 69655

THE DARK KEYS—Columbia 67876

BUCKSHOT LEFONQUE—Columbia 52323

BLOOMINGTON—Columbia 52461

I HEARD YOU TWICE THE FIRST TIME—

Columbia 46083

THE BEAUTYFUL ONES ARE NOT YET

BORN—Columbia 46990

MUSIC FROM MO' BETTER BLUES—

Columbia 46792

CRAZY PEOPLE MUSIC—Columbia

46072

TRIO JEEPY—Columbia 44199

RANDOM ABSTRACT—Columbia 44055

RENAISSANCE—Columbia 40711

ROYAL GARDEN BLUES—Columbia 40363

SCENES IN THE CITY—Columbia 38951

with various others

WHISTLE STOP—Columbia 53177

(Ellis Marsalis)

PONTIUS PILATE'S DECISION—Novus

63134 (Delfeayo Marsalis)

BLACK CODES FROM THE UNDER-

GROUND—Columbia 40009 (Wynton

Marsalis)

HOT HOUSE FLOWERS—Columbia

39530 (Wynton Marsalis)

FALLING IN LOVE WITH JAZZ—Milestone

9179 (Sonny Rollins)

DECOY—Columbia 38891 (Miles Davis)

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MICHAEL HILL,  
SHEMEKIA COPELAND  
AND GUY DAVIS  
LEAD THE WAY FOR AN  
EMERGING GENERATION OF  
CREATIVE BLUES ARTISTS**

**M**ike Welch has served on the front lines for an ever-evolving army of blues men and women since Dan Aykroyd "discovered" him five years ago at the original House of Blues.

"I see guys out there who are playing music that you'd barely categorize as blues," the 19-year-old guitar prodigy from suburban Boston reports. "The younger generation of players seems to be in that vein where blues is one of the strongest influences, but it's not the only influence."

Welch is one of an entire troop of newly emerging guitarists and vocalists who are revising and rewriting the blues. He and his fellow soldiers might lack the star-appeal artillery of contemporary media favorites like Johnny Lang and Kenny Wayne Sheppard, but they are winning their battle to deliver valid, updated and accessible forms of the blues to audiences nationwide.

The new blues revolution probably won't be televised. Instead, truer to the music's tradition, the invasion is taking place on a grass-roots level, in the blues clubs and on small record labels. Based in a younger generation's unbiased willingness to merge traditional forms with more modern musical stylings and fearless determination to take chances in the name of self-expression, the movement has shot new life into an art form with an all-too-frequent case of the same-ol', same-ol' blues.

Welch understands how the vital energy of blending rock 'n' roll and rhythm 'n' blues with straightahead blues encourages artistic creativity. His band with organist Jack Hamilton sounds like a new-fashioned Booker T and the MGs. "You have to find yourself in the music you're playing," says Welch, who takes the music somewhere special when he plays runs of impossibly fast notes in a Magic Sam number or carefully probes his psyche during a 10-minute Freddie King slow blues.

"I see a lot of bands who are interested in creating 1957, but it tends to treat the music as a museum piece rather than as a living thing. If you limit yourself to one genre, and it doesn't matter what the genre is, only a handful of real geniuses can find their own voice within the confines of a tradition without breaking out of it. The rest of us have to explore."

**BY FRANK-JOHN HADLEY**

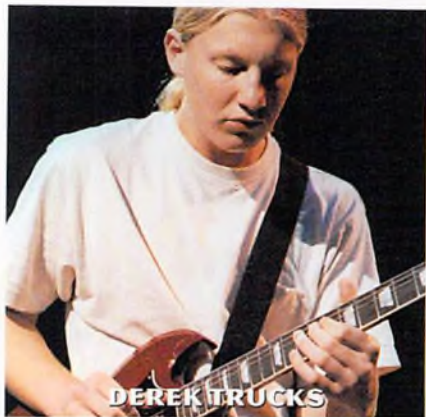
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MIKE WELCH

You'd better think twice before pinning the "blues man" tag on Derek Trucks, too.

"When I think of blues," the 19-year-old slide guitar whiz says with characteristic



humility, "I think of Son House and Howlin' Wolf. I don't think I have the capacity to [play like] that. I wish I could."

Trucks claims it's tough to remake, say, "Preachin' Blues," the Son House number. "It's one of those things where you step back and say, 'Should I even mess with that?' It was so perfect within itself." His tart, biting, raw and raggedy intonation on slide guitar gets the job done, electrifying this old lampoon on religion.

Trucks has House, Howlin' Wolf and John Lee Hooker up on the pedestal aside John Coltrane, Lee Morgan, Wayne Shorter and Indian or Pakistani virtuosos Zakir Hussain, Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan and Ali Akbar Khan. "[I'm] trying to research them as far back and deeply as I can and look forward at the same time," he says. "I think any time you listen to something and study it very heavily, it comes out in your writing and in your phrasing."

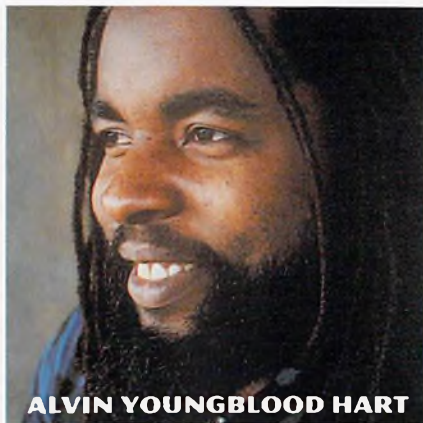
One highlight of Trucks' live show and his new album, *Out Of The Madness*, is the exploratory "Pleasant Gardens," where he weaves fluid slide guitar against Todd Smallie's insistent electric bass. "I wanted to do something in an odd time signature, 7/4, and change it up. Todd and I sat down and wrote it after listening to Ali Akbar Khan with a sarod player and after listening to Coltrane's *Live At Birdland*."

It is anyone's guess where Trucks' new friendship with Cecil Taylor might take him musically. The notoriously uncompromising jazz pianist heard the Trucks Band at Manny's Car Wash in New York and afterwards hung out for several hours with the pony-tailed guitarist from Jacksonville. The two even talked about making a record together. "That would be beautiful!" says Trucks, son of Allman Brothers drummer Butch Trucks, still dazzled by the meeting.

Memphis-based guitarist Alvin Youngblood Hart, another free spirit with a solid foundation in the blues, hasn't crossed paths with any eminent

jazz pianists of late. Instead, he's been running with the alternative rock crowd as opening solo act for the Afghan Whigs or Son Volt.

"It's kind of loud, so I'm playing electric guitar as opposed to doing my regular acoustic gig," he says. This former Coast Guard boatman looks well beyond blues for inspiration, his limitless imagination going hand in hand with an effortless technique on an eclectic repertoire of traditional blues ("it's my native folk music"), western swing, vintage pop, reggae and oddball rock. Celebrating his 20th year as a musician and guitar repairer/buyer/seller/trader, Hart says he's looking forward to recording a "kind of hard fusion thing, if you got to put labels on it. I grew up on all that early- to mid-'70s Frank Zappa music." And he'd also like to do a tribute to Sonny Sharrock with his older brother, a funk bass player currently living in Japan.



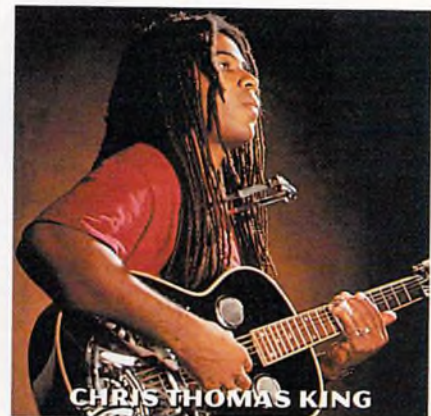
"One of the ways for me to keep music enjoyable is to cover a lot of ground or play whatever I feel I can get away with at the time," he says, recalling lessons learned during the short time he spent with Gatemouth Brown. "He was always telling me to forget about what labels people want to put on you and just try to have a good time playing music."

Hart, whose family hails from the hills of Mississippi, has a special affinity for the country blues of Bukka White and Skip James. "If a song speaks to me in a personal way then I try to get into it, otherwise I leave it alone."

Chris Thomas King, living in New Orleans after spending several years in Denmark, speaks of his idiosyncratic musical vision in painterly terms.

"You can't have just one shade of blue. You got this deep blue, this dark blue, this light blue. I try to use all the colors that are there. I'll use sampling. I'll use drum loops. I'll use classical string arrangements or whatever it takes to finish painting that picture."

He feels the electronic effects on his new country blues album, *Red Mud*, and the string backdrops for acoustic guitar on his upcoming release are novel innova-

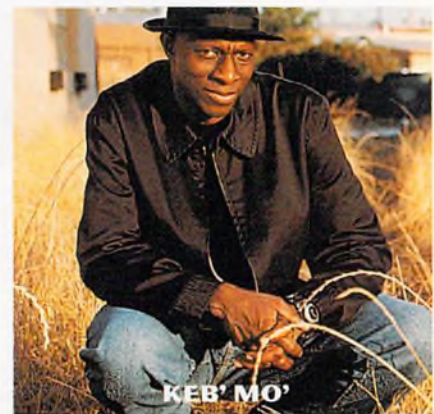


tions that have a place in blues, not unlike the introduction of electric guitar decades ago. "But [nothing] changes the fact that I'm Chris Thomas King, the blues artist from Louisiana," affirms the son of Baton Rouge blues legend Tabby Thomas.

Ke'b' Mo', another guitarist with a strong sense of self, is right at home in the blues, even though his new CD, *Slow Down*, has a pop shine to it, thanks in part to cozy electronic keyboards.

The Californian, who's widely known for his acoustic blues, says, "I trust my instincts and go with them. I was doing popular music before I did the blues, so those kinds of things kind of naturally come into play. It's not like I'm trying to be a pop artist on the blues. I like the blues. I just do what comes naturally to me, and hopefully I don't get too far out."

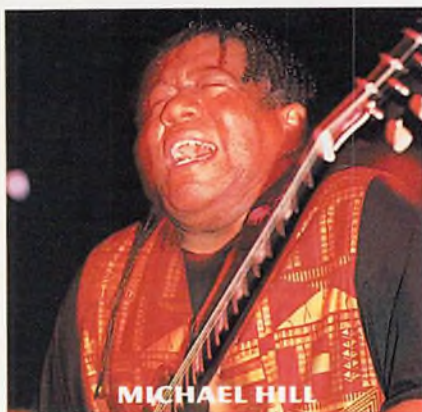
Indeed, his singing cuts through the synthetic veneer loud and clear, conveying genuine blues feeling, and his guitar work, what there is of it, anyway, is affecting. This heir apparent to Taj Mahal sin-



gles out "Henry" as "one of my favorite songs because it's a tribute to all the old blues men. It's important to respect the elders and study them, but it's just as important to do your own thing."

Michael Hill, guitar-playing leader of the Bronx-based Blues Mob, also simultaneously does his own thing and honors the past.

"Cats like Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf brought something personal to the



blues. That's what we're trying to do in our time, put some of our own lives into the blues as well." Hill always keeps the blues as the primary ingredient in his music, adding what he calls the "seasonings and flavorings" of funk, rock, soul and reggae.

His guitar language is similarly full-bodied and distinctive. "I try to not be someone who copies someone else, and my influences are really varied: Hendrix, Santana, B.B. and Albert King, Otis Rush, Sonny Sharrock, Vernon Reid, and my friends like Calvin Bell—anybody whose playing touches my heart."

Someone whose voice will touch your heart is Shemekia Copeland, who sings with an understanding and poise well beyond her 19 years. "I just get up there and do what I love to do," she says in a soft, tender speaking voice so different from what you'd expect from hearing her raise Cain in concert or on her debut album in '98. Copeland's growl may be lifted from Koko Taylor, and she takes other mannerisms from Etta James, yet she's fast developing her own style. After all, she has rich bloodlines as the daughter of the late Johnny Copeland.

Shemekia laughs demurely when recalling how she used to practice singing at home before beginning a career in music. "My mom and brother went crazy, but my daddy said, 'Let that girl scream and holler.' He didn't care. He sat in the living room and laughed at me while I was upstairs making a fool out of myself. I think it did help me, eventually." She says she still likes to belt out Sam Cooke and



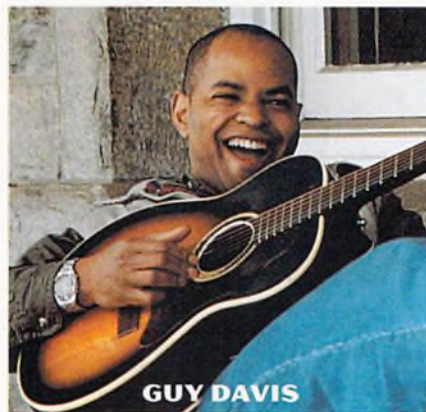
Otis Redding soul numbers at home.

Copeland's father was known globally as a stellar Texas blues guitarist, but he did his share of musical exploring as well, like adding African musicians or world-class jazz saxophonists to his regular band. "Daddy was good about branching off and doing different things," Shemekia says. "And I'm definitely into things like that. I got a few ideas, but it's too early to tell what they are."

Welch has heard his friend Shemekia perform numerous times—and he's concerned about her getting the recognition and rewards she deserves. "I think in some ways 'Mekia's being short-changed by the whole 'release an album on Alligator and sell 30,000 records and do 300 dates a year in tiny blues clubs and big festivals and call that a career' thing. I've heard her sing things that are worthy of Mahalia Jackson or Otis Redding. There are a lot of great female singers out there, but few of them can evoke moods like that!"

Not far from the Copeland family home in Teaneck, N.J., over the George Washington Bridge in New York, is where Guy Davis hangs his hat when not on the road.

The boyish-looking acoustic blues guitarist, who also takes blues acting gigs and writes screenplays, is served well by



pedigree, having legendary stage and screen stars Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee for parents. Yet there's someone else in his family tree on his mind these days.

"Of course the blues is very old, and there's really nothing new to it other than to say that same old stuff a different way," he says. "But I've surprised myself by playing licks I've never heard before, and I don't know where they came from. I've been talking to my grandmother, and she's telling me that my grandfather's father used to be a blues man. I played her a brand new song just the day before yesterday, and she said, 'That's your great-grandfather right there!'"

These progressive, open-minded musicians struggle to some extent with die-hard blues audiences, business-minded club owners and book-

ing agents of a conservative mindset.

"We've been working a lot of straight blues clubs playing music that isn't straight blues, and people who come see us without any preconceived notion love the band," Welch notes. "But then there's the other element that paid a \$10 cover to see what they thought was a [pure] blues band because of one record they heard three or four years ago."

When faced with please-the-crowd pressure from club owners, Hart fights to protect his artistic integrity. He speaks openly about refusing to conform to commercial trends and retro-blues gimmickry. "Looking at what is the norm in the blues world these days, I'm not sure I want to be associated with that at all, man, all the shark-skin suits and sunglasses. I prefer freedom."

Hill, one of the friendliest guys in the business, encounters resistance on occasion as well. His intelligent and probing song lyrics scare off folks who want nothing other than clichés about broken romance and partying. "Sometimes," the *New Yorker* says, "I sing about things that are painful [poverty and street violence, for example], but I try to write songs from a perspective where there's a sense of hope because I really want our music to be something uplifting for people."

Still, each of these still-developing storytellers approaches classic blues with respect and imagination. And any one of them will tell you the uniquely American invention called the blues and its offshoots have a promising future, notwithstanding an ever-lengthening obituary list.

Listen to Hill: "There are people who are bringing new energy and perspective to the blues, incorporating that into the tradition, and I think that kind of thing keeps the music alive and growing."

Or Davis: "I'm optimistic about it having a secure place, but there's always a need to have more work done, not just from me but from other musicians involved here," he says. "It's all dead stuff, but it's brought back to life by people going out to see it, investigating it and finding out things they didn't know about it." **DB**

#### SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

- Shemekia Copeland**  
*TURN THE HEAT UP*—Alligator 4857
- Guy Davis**  
*YOU DON'T KNOW MY MIND*—Red House 113
- Alvin Youngblood Hart**  
*TERRITORY*—Hannibal 1431
- Michael Hill's Blues Mob**  
*NEW YORK STATE OF BLUES*—Alligator 4858
- Keb' Mo'**  
*SLOW DOWN*—OKeh/550 Music 69376
- Chris Thomas King**  
*RED MUD*—Black Top 1148
- The Derek Trucks Band**  
*OUT OF THE MADNESS*—House of Blues 51416
- Mike Welch**  
*CATCH ME*—Tone-Cool 1167



## CHUCHO VALDÉS

# 'The Piano Plays Me'

A spiritual exchange permeates the most intimate relationships. Souls mix and meld into a single being. Experiences become simultaneous. Secrets flake away, exposing only truth; and in this truth, elegant communication emerges.

Jesus "Chucho" Valdés knows from experience that such a love demands complete selflessness: His 50-plus-year affair with the piano has turned his very soul over to Afro-Cuban jazz.

"Sometimes I think I'm a piano, and sometimes I think that the piano is me," says Valdés, sitting in his dressing room at the Petrillo Music Shell, still buzzing after Irakere's hour-long set at last summer's Chicago Jazz Festival. "Sometimes I play the piano, and sometimes the piano plays me. The music is always in my head. It's all of my life. It's my life."

If only the piano could also speak. What sentiments would it express about Valdés? Well, for starters, the instrument he played that night would probably concede it had rarely been commanded in such dramatic fashion, blending Afro-Cuban jams with jazz into such a comfortable symbiosis (including a version of "Giant Steps" at a speed and precision that would make Coltrane cower).

The piano would speak of post-workout exhaustion, having jumped between styles in lightning-quick turns, one second recalling Bud Powell and the next Beethoven, literally shaking beneath the massive hands of this broad-shouldered, 6-foot 5-inch giant. And most of all, the instrument would revel in being touched with such precision and care by the innovative and masterful hands of today's patriarch of Cuban jazz.

With Cuban music exploding in Stateside popularity, Valdés is finding ways to play more frequently in the land of the free. After all, it was not until 1988 that the Cuban government officially allowed its musicians to play in the States, and they could only do so under the premise of a cultural exchange. And the United States has continually been reluctant to issue visas to Cuban musicians. For example, the Irakere date at last summer's Chicago Jazz Festival was the band's first visit to Chicago in over a decade.

So Valdés has started weaning his work as Irakere's musical director (training the group's artistic director, his son Francisco Valdés, to take the lead) so he can focus more on solo and small ensemble performance. In support of last year's Grammy-nominated *Bele Bele En La Habana* (see "CD Reviews" October '98), Valdés was able to play with his quartet and in solo settings in places such as New York's Village Vanguard, Chicago, Los Angeles, Washington, D.C., Philadelphia and St. Paul, Minn. Having garnered rave reviews, *Bele Bele En La Habana* features Valdés and fellow Cubans bassist Alain Pérez Rodríguez, drummer Raúl Piñeda Roque and percussionist Roberto Vizcaino Guillot laying down eight standard-bearing Afro-Cuban jazz tunes.

"I'm going more toward playing with the quartet and solo," he says, brandishing his warm and inviting smile. "I like playing solo. The piano is all mine. I can do whatever I want, no one is going to bother me and I don't have to follow anyone else. With the quartet, I can develop the piano more [than playing with Irakere]. I'm trying to mix up styles, also. My inspiration for this quartet was McCoy Tyner's trios. I want to do that with Latin jazz. It's much more Latin jazz than straightahead jazz, and there's some *pure* Cuban music in there as well."

---

BY JASON KORANSKY  
PHOTO BY CAROL FRIEDMAN

Back in Chicago three months after the jazz festival to play with his quartet at Symphony Center, Valdés speaks passionately about Cuban music at an afternoon clinic attended by more than 200 elementary school children and about 75 adults. At a piano in the middle of a gym in the largely Hispanic Pilsen neighborhood, he raves about Cuba's music schools, where students study a strict classical regimen and in their free time practice jazz. He tells stories about some 15 all-female big bands in the country, and how his daughter plays drums with one of them. He beams with pride when discussing details of last December's 18th Annual Havana International Jazz Festival (see "Caught" Page 60), an event he helped found in 1980. Today, he serves as the festival's director, in a more honorary than active basis.

In Havana, Valdés appeared both omnipresent and ghostly. His name lented heft and international stature to a program run with minimal resources. He presided over the jury of the first annual IberJazz jazz composition competition (organized by Spain's Sociedad General de Autores y Editores), was an honored guest at the United States' Interest Section's Sunday afternoon jam, took the stage for a duet with Dominican pianist Michel Camilo and



KEN FRACKLING

showed up seemingly everywhere that a seal of importance was needed.

However, throughout the festival he seemed detached, even if unfailingly polite. He also basked in adulation. His presence in the Cuban jazz scene is such that a visiting pianist was still shaking his head, stunned, as he told of finding out that the piano bench at the Teatro Nacional is permanently set to Valdés' height. For the pianist to perform, the stage hands had to scramble to find a bench that could be adjusted. "The people read about Valdés' success, especially when he goes to the United States, and live it as their triumph," said a Cuban journalist who requested his name not be

used. "The government tries to take credit, to turn it into a Revolution success story, and to a point it is. But the people don't totally buy that. They see Valdés as *pueblo* (common folk)."

So at 57 he still lives in Havana, unlike his former Irakere partners Paquito D'Rivera, Arturo Sandoval or Carlos Averhoff, who defected to pursue opportunities in the States. He's comfortable in Cuba. He has seven children there, a weekly Sunday jazz show on state-run radio and prestige. He cannot bring himself to leave his home, where he can immerse himself in centuries-old musical traditions.

"We have the Arará tradition, with the batá drums, that came from Africa to Cuba. This legacy has been passed down from generation to generation. People from Nigeria, the Congo and South America brought *muchos, muchos, muchos* rhythms and traditions to Cuba. We also have the Spanish tradition, and the Spanish came with their own African influence, from the north of Africa. Spain came to the Americas with almost eight centuries of Arabian influence in their culture and rhythm. So in Cuba, everything converged in one place."

Still, Valdés likes to place his own spin on Cuban musical traditions, such as tinkering with the son. The son is a centu-

## A Matter Of Greatness

Chucho Valdés' bond with the piano came as inevitable. After all, his father was the legendary pianist/composer/arranger Ramon "Bebo" Valdés, and his mother played the piano as well. Shortly after learning to walk, Valdés was at the piano bench, learning the instrument's rudiments. This was in the '40s, a time when traditional Cuban music was in the process of fusing with jazz, expedited by Dizzy Gillespie's collaborations with "Chano" Pozo. His home became a meeting place for the likes of bandleader Benny Moré, pianist Ernesto Lecuona and "Chico" O'Farrill.

It would have been impossible for Valdés to have not become a good musician. But greatness, that's an entirely different matter.

"My father really started me composing," Valdés says, recalling the countless hours he spent working through classical compositions as a child. "He would say, 'Listen, the person who wrote this music knows more than you and me combined, so play what's written.' But as a music student, there were works that I liked playing and others that I really hated playing. And I got to thinking that it was such a pity that sometimes songs that started so nicely ended up making no sense. You have to respect what the composer wrote and what he wants, but I have to admit that when I was growing up I would change a lot of the music from how it was written."

Valdés was born with a compositional and leadership seed; it

just needed time to germinate. He blossomed as a pianist, working in several big bands in the '60s and forming his own jazz-oriented quartets and quintets, inspired by the playing of Art Tatum, Thelonious Monk, Bud Powell, McCoy Tyner and Wynton Kelly. Then in 1973 he formed Irakere, fusing jazz, Afro-Cuban and rock with an all-star lineup including a young Arturo Sandoval and Paquito D'Rivera.

Tours, accolades, Grammys and fame followed, but all the while, due to the ongoing tensions between the Castro regime and the U.S. government, his work rarely brought him to the States.

"I never thought that Irakere would last this long," Valdés says. "I thought that it would only be one period on the stage, but the work had its own logic and it's continued to this day. We've changed the people in the band, but it just keeps going."

"It's an emotional moment playing in the States," he continues. "We just keep on thinking, If we could only play here more. We did this 11 years ago, and now we hope we do not have to wait another 11 years."

"It's so frustrating, because jazz has nothing to do with politics. If the problems that we have today existed in the '40s Chano would not have been able to come to the States to work, and we wouldn't have ever known Latin jazz. But when it functions well, Cuban music and American music come together to create something stronger than either side has." —J.K.

ry-old slow to mid-tempo blending of Cuban and European elements developed in eastern Cuba that lies at the roots of much of today's Cuban music. He hears so much more potential in the piano than the simple binary changes that traditional son offers.

"I was trying to figure out ways to enrich the son," he says, then proceeds to demonstrate his son creations on the piano. "The rhythm is great, but the harmony is very poor. So I began searching in the roots of jazz, and I found a way out of it with jazz chords. Playing this rhythm and applying it to the blues makes it so much more interesting. Cuban music and jazz are like the computer world, where you have compatible computers and incompatible computers. Cuban music is 100 percent compatible with North American music, or Brazilian music, Mexican music, Venezuelan music."

The tune "Son Montuno" from *Bele En La Habana* exemplifies the compositional liberties Valdés often takes. Here he uses a son melody and rhythm in the head and plays them with such speed and power you would think he was a driver in the Indianapolis 500. This leads into a raunchy solo blues section that segues into an ornate classical cadenza. Out of the classical comes a torrid drum and bass solo, which eventually returns to the driving son-derived head.

These sorts of stylistic leaps are common for Valdés. His physical roots may be in Cuba, but his musical roots cross numerous genres.

"I've been working at mixing Afro-Cuban elements with jazz for many years," he says. "And the classical elements come from my formation, when I studied classical music. So when I start playing, all of these influences from my past come out. Traditional music makes me feel really good, but I also feel that when I play pure jazz. That's why I feel that these two musics are doing the same thing." **DB**

*Fernando Gonzalez contributed to this report.*

#### EQUIPMENT

Chucho Valdés prefers Steinway pianos.

#### SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

*BELE EN LA HABANA*—Blue Note 23082  
*LIVE!*—RMM 82251  
*PIANISSIMO*—Iris 40  
*SOLO PIANO*—Blue Note 80597

#### with Irakere

*YEMAYA*—Blue Note 98239  
*FROM HAVANA WITH LOVE*—Records 2223  
*BABALU AYE*—Bembé 2020-2  
*TODA CUBA BAILA CON*—Uni/Max 2099  
*LA COLECCION CUBANA*—Music Club 50081  
*INDESTRUCTIBLE*—Iris 36  
*GRANDE MOMENTOS*—BMG/Milan 35778  
*LIVE AT RONNIE SCOTT'S*—Blue Note 80598  
*AFROCUBANISMO!*—Bembé 2012-2  
*BEST OF IRAKERE*—Sony Music 57719  
*FELICIDAD*—Jazz House 9

#### with Various Others

*HABANA*—Verve 537563 (Roy Hargrove)  
*SPIRIT TALK*—K-Jazz 1213 (All-Stars Y Amigos)

# ARBORS RECORDS

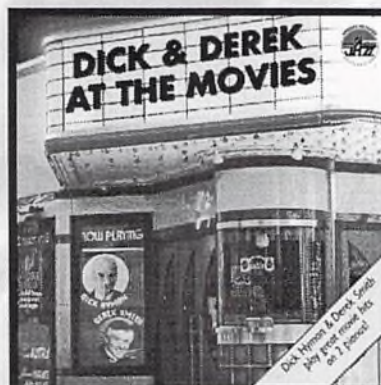


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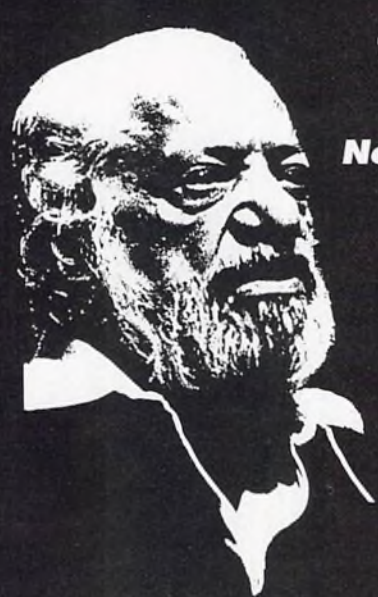
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At 90 years old, Claude "Fiddler" Williams has experienced plenty of career setbacks.

He's faced recurring demands by club owners and band leaders to put down the violin in favor of the guitar. He was abandoned by the Andy Kirk band after getting sick on the road. And he lost his chair in the first great Count Basie band to Freddie Green, just as the band was breaking nationally.

But despite these early roadblocks, Williams has persevered in his calling as a jazz violinist. He has outlived all of his contemporaries, his career flourishing in recent years with educational workshops, international tours, recording dates and a bounty of awards, including a National Heritage Fellowship bestowed last October by First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton at the White House.

Born in Muskogee, Okla., in 1908, Williams learned to play the piano by ear before switching to mandolin and guitar. He was introduced to the violin when Joe Venuti came to Muskogee with a big band, and his memory of that first contact is still vivid. "You could hear that fiddle over all the big band," he says. "I told my mama that's what I want to play. The next day when I got home from school, there was a fiddle."

As a member of his brother-in-law's string band, Williams traveled by train between Oklahoma City and Tulsa, performing with the group for tips. Their repertoire included ragtime, popular standards and blues.

"We didn't run into other string bands, except for a few white bands," Williams notes. Instead, Williams drew inspiration from the early jazz greats who were just beginning to tour and make recordings, including Louis Armstrong. "I first heard Louis Armstrong in Tulsa, and he played a diminished chord. That really inspired me to learn changes and chords." Williams feels this gave him an edge over other violinists. "That's why I was a little ahead of other fiddlers. Now, Stuff Smith could swing, but he didn't know anything about changes and chords. All the cats wanted to jam with me because they knew they would hear changes, something different, not just jazzin' the melody." With so few violinists playing jazz, Williams modeled his style after brass and reed instruments. "That's because I mostly jammed with trumpets and saxophones," he explains.

In 1927, Williams joined T. Holder's 11 Clouds of Joy, one of the leading territorial bands in the area. "We played mostly waltzes, foxtrots and popular standards. We'd play a chorus and a half before the man would blow the whistle and call another number."

Holder needed an alto player, so he sent for John Williams in Memphis, who brought along his piano-playing wife, Mary Lou, then known as Mary Williams. "We didn't need a piano player," the fiddler recalls. "But Mary came along, helping rehearse the band and writing arrangements with Andy Kirk. She was playing strong even then."

After T. Holder failed to make a payday, the band ousted him from the band and elected Andy Kirk leader, according to Williams, "because he was the oldest and most settled." It was a commonwealth band with the members dividing the profits evenly and making decisions democratically. In the summer of 1929, the Kirk band opened at the Pla-Mor, Kansas City's "million dollar ballroom." Kansas City was wide open, presenting ample opportunities for musicians in the ballrooms, summer resorts and numerous clubs in the entertainment district between 12th and 18th streets. "Kansas City was a good-time place," Williams remembers fondly. "The clubs never closed. You'd start playing at six that evening and go all night until the next morning when they would close the door to sweep up."

The Kirk band quickly established itself, enjoying the same stature as local favorites Bennie Moten, George E. Lee and the Blue Devils. They frequently competed in the battle of the bands sponsored by Musicians Protective Union 627 at Paseo Hall.

After recording for the Brunswick label in 1929 and 1930, the Kirk band began touring the East Coast. While in Toledo with the Kirk Band, Williams hooked up with Art Tatum. "Art Tatum could play more piano than any one I had ever seen," Williams says. "We were playing on one side of a lake, and Tatum on the other. After we would get off work, we'd hit the joints jamming. Whiskey would be lined up, and Tatum would play 'Tea For Two' with his left hand and 'Honeysuckle Rose' with his right."

Williams was featured on banjo and violin with the Kirk band, but Kirk really wanted him to concentrate on guitar. Williams resisted the change preferring the violin, not wanting to be relegated to playing just rhythm. When he injured his leg while on

# THE FIDDLER'S TRIUMPH



BY CHUCK HADDIX • PHOTOS BY WOJTEK KUBIK

# CLAUDE WILLIAMS

the road playing a string of one-night stands, the Kirk band left him behind, replacing him with a guitarist. Williams relates with some irony how they let his wife know where he was at so at least she could send for him.

Returning to Kansas City, Williams worked with a small group in a taxi dance hall at 12th and McGee. They took turns auditioning for the manager. "I played some banjo and then some fiddle," Williams says. "The manager asked the pianist, Charlie Washington, 'Where did you get the fiddler?' Charlie answered that I 'was the best fiddle player in the country.' The manager said, 'Tell him if he wants a job to play the banjo and don't play no more fiddle.' I laid off the fiddle for nearly a year while I played there. When I got back to it, I almost had to learn it all over again."

After a short time with the Chick Stevens band at the Seneca Hotel in Peoria, Ill., Williams moved to Chicago. He soon joined bassist Eddie Cole's band, which featured Nat Cole on piano. Williams auditioned for the band at the Yellow Front, where they were playing. "I walked down the street and asked them if they were doing any jamming. They asked what I played, and I told them guitar and fiddle. I played a tune for them on my guitar and then my fiddle. They asked me to play another number on the fiddle. Then they told me to lay down the guitar and just play the fiddle. They asked me to join the band, and we began rehearsing. They had the best musicians in Chicago. We played the Regal Theater and then hit the road."

The bookings got ahead of the Cole band, and Williams left them in Kentucky. He chuckles as he recalls how "Nat didn't sing in those days—didn't even know he could sing—but he was one of the best pianists in Chicago."

Williams returned to Chicago, where Count Basie sent for him to join the Barons of Rhythm at the Reno Club. Williams remembers the legendary Reno Club as a "small club, really a hole in the wall where you had to step down a few stairs to enter." The Basie group was in transition with John Hammond bankrolling the expansion of the band and preparing them for their national debut. "Lester Young, Walter Page and Jo Jones were in the band, and Basie sent for Herschel Evans in California," Williams recounts. "Buck Clayton came through Kansas City and joined." Williams feels that Hammond pushed the Basie band too quickly, recalling a disappointing big band battle the night before they left Kansas City. "Duke Ellington blew us out of the other side of the hall because we didn't have arrangements," he says. "All of Basie's arrangements were for nine pieces, not a 12-piece band, so we had to play head arrangements. The band wasn't ready."

After playing the Grand Terrace and a string of one-nighters, the Basie band opened at the Roseland Ballroom in New York. Shortly after the group's debut, Williams and several other bandmembers received their notice. The violinist remembers with pride how "it had nothing to do with my playing. Hammond didn't want a soloist in the rhythm section. Every time I would play the fiddle, there would be big applause."

Deeply hurt by his dismissal, Williams returned to Kansas City and his roots in the string band tradition, forming the Three Swing Men of Swing and opening at Lucille's Paradise, a cozy club upstairs on 18th Street. Lucille's quickly became the spot in Kansas City, with nightly radio broadcasts. "We were keeping the place packed every night," Williams reminisces.

"Then Lucille put in saxophones, and the business immediately dropped off."

Adapting to the public's changing musical tastes, Williams moved to Los Angeles in the early 1950s, joining Roy Milton's Solid Senders. He made the transition from jazz to blues easily. "I could always play the blues," Williams muses. "That's one of the things I had to teach Charlie Parker. He was struggling with the changes, and I showed him how to play the blues. Jazz isn't anything but the blues."

During the 1960s and 1970s, Williams maintained his home

base in Kansas City working with Jay McShann. In 1972, Williams was featured prominently on McShann's Sackville recording *The Man From Muskogee*, which led to a 1973 appearance at Newport, in New York at Lincoln Center, tours of Europe and other recording dates. Although they still occasionally work together, Williams quit working regularly with McShann during the late 1970s. The reason for their parting "was the old deal," as Williams puts it. "We were playing in Lincoln, Neb., at an American Legion Hall, when someone in the audience didn't care for my fiddle playing and asked Jay to tell me to hold the fiddle down.

Jay asked me to just play guitar, and I quit on the spot."

Williams credits his current success to a referral by fellow violinist John Blake. "I gave John a tape when he was in Kansas City. In 1981, the producers of the Broadway show *Black And Blue* were looking for a violinist, and John didn't want to leave his family, so he recommended me. I rehearsed with the show for a couple of weeks and joined the cast. We played Paris for five or six months, and I left the cast when we returned to New York." Since then, with the help of his booking agent and friend, Russ Dantzler, Claude has toured steadily, recorded substantially and garnered numerous awards.

With a career that spans the entire history of jazz, Williams is looking to the future with plans for more tours and recording dates. Williams even has a new fiddle. Cradling it in his arms, he looks at it and smiles. "No one's ever mastered it," he repeats, "but I'm going to keep trying." **DB**

*This oral history with Claude "Fiddler" Williams is the first installment of Down Beat's First Person Project, launched in honor of our 65th anniversary year. An ongoing series of profiles, the First Person Project lets jazz's elder statesmen tell the history of the music in their own words.* —ed.

**Chuck Haddix** is the Sound Recording Specialist at the Marr Sound Archives, Miller Nichols Library, University of Missouri-Kansas City.



#### EQUIPMENT

Claude Williams uses a fiddle made in Germany about 150 years ago by the independent builder Metzler, a copy of an Amati. He uses Thomastik Dominant strings, with a perlon core, and an L. R. Baggs bridge pickup.

#### SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

CALL FOR THE FIDDLER—Steeplechase 31051  
DEFINITIVE BLACK AND BLUE  
SESSIONS—Night & Day 901.2  
FRANKFURT JIVE AT FIVE—Bellaphon 40025  
KING OF KANSAS CITY—Progressive 7100

LIVE AT J'S PART 1—Arhoolie 405  
SWINGTIME IN NEW YORK—Progressive 7093

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# You Can't Do

By Charles Levin

Discontent permeates jazz radio. A broad swath of musicians complain that they cannot garner the necessary airplay to make their albums commercially viable. Artists once coveted by station program managers are being virtually ignored. Stations sound identical from market to market. Public radio has lost some of its edge. And fans of more adventurous forms of jazz have been left to fend for their own.

But despite the sorry state of jazz on the airwaves, numerous smooth jazz stations across the country rank in the top 5 in their listening zone, and many public radio stations have witnessed an resurgence in pledges. So if jazz radio is suffering through such a Dark Age, what explanation can be given for more people tuning in?

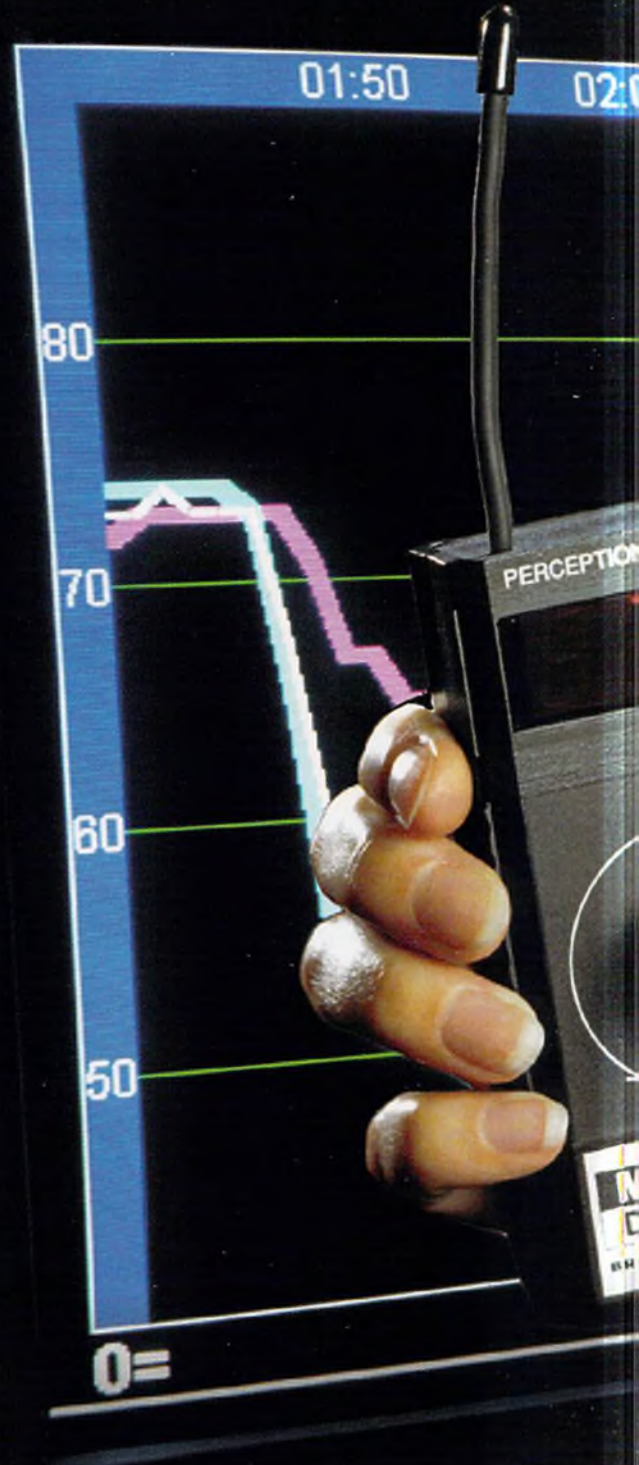
This can be answered in one word: testing.



**Boney James**

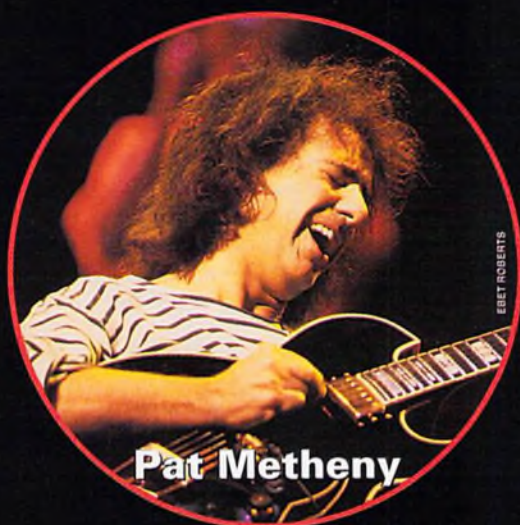


**Chick Corea**



The tools of radio testing: a handheld Mix-Master music perception analyzer (foreground), and listeners' reactions graphed on a video monitor (background).

# That . . .



# Or Can You?

# Part I: Servants Of Mix-Master

Pat Metheny flunked the test. Boney James aced it. Chick Corea failed. Dave Koz made the dean's list. The Yellowjackets can't muster passing grades. Kenny G ... well, he's the teacher's pet.

The test in question is called Mix-Master, a high-tech approach that allows groups of prescreened radio listeners to rate songs and, ultimately, decide whether they get airplay.

Nearly every format on the dial now relies on tests, but "research" hasn't stirred up as much acrimony in any format as it has in smooth jazz. The tests have winnowed some of the jazz world's most cutting-edge musicians from the airwaves, artists like Metheny, Corea and the Yellowjackets who often fall between the cracks of mainstream jazz or hard fusion or soft smooth jazz. Ironically, they were among the wildly diverse group of artists who defined this format when it emerged about 12 years ago.

The musicians—joined by their managers, record labels, producers and promoters—assail the tests as unfair, especially in the face of declining record sales.

But Frank Cody, CEO of Princeton, N.J.-based Broadcast Architecture, whose Mix-Master test single-handedly elevated smooth jazz to a multimillion dollar format, defends the methodology. Along with program directors from BA's client stations, Cody argues this is the only way to promote jazz to the masses and sell advertising in markets that now compete with other radio formats, cable television and the Internet.

Here's how the test works: About 100 people gather in a hotel ballroom. Each cradles a little remote control box in their hands with a dial. Music plays over a speaker system in 10-second sound bytes. Occasionally, it's longer—12 seconds, maybe 15. The participants listen to about 600 sound bytes in two-and-a-half hours. They turn the dial one way if they like the song, the other way if they loathe it. The scores range from zero to 100. A score of 70 or better means airplay is likely. Below 70 and it's usually history.

In a nearby room, station officials and

BA consultants stare at a video monitor with lines that dance across its screen. Jokingly called the EKG, the lines show listeners' real-time reactions to the sound bytes as grouped by demographics: avid listeners, part-time listeners, men, women, age, ethnic groups. The lines also show when squealing saxophones break the mood, solos drone on too long and when listeners want to change stations.

Pass the test, you get on BA's recommended airplay list, delivered weekly to its 26 client stations, nine in the top 10 radio markets nationwide. Weekly trade papers report BA's decisions, and non-client stations follow its lead. (BA isn't the only consultant on the scene but unquestionably the most successful.)

To paraphrase one San Francisco Bay Area musician, if BA gives your song a thumbs up, nationwide airplay is guaran-



Yellowjackets: can't muster passing grades in smooth jazz radio testing.

teed—thumbs down and it's time to take up plumbing.

"If it doesn't fit into the format, it doesn't get played," drummer Dave Weckl says. "It's a joke." Corea's drummer for seven years, Weckl spent most of last year in his maiden voyage as a bandleader but found it nearly impossible to get airplay for his newest album, *Rhythm Of The Soul* (Stretch).

Metheny agrees. He packs large theaters to SRO attendance, but airplay eludes him. He doesn't test well, DJs tell him. When they do play songs, such as "James" from 1982's *Offramp*, or "Follow Me" from 1997's *Imaginary Day*, program directors edit out the solos.

"I'm really at the point where I'd rather they just didn't play any of our music than do what they do," Metheny says. "On the other hand, because we are in an era where there are so few opportunities to be heard, I can't say, 'Go

away.' We actually need every bit of exposure we can get. I'm not going to lie about it. It's a matter of survival for us."

Equally ambivalent are Yellowjackets co-founders Russell Ferrante and Jimmy Haslip, who bear no animosity at BA or other consultants. "Mile High," from the group's 1984 album *Four Corners*, still gets played on some stations in heavy rotation, about 35 spins a week. But now DJs privately apologize for not playing anything from the five albums that followed, all featuring radio-friendly cuts, bassist Haslip says.

"If the criterion was a song that was very melodic and wasn't wildly assaulting and frantic—because I understand they're trying to create a certain kind of mood—yeah, there were songs on all those records that would have fit that bill," says keyboardist Ferrante.

For BA's client stations, an ironclad reasoning dictates these decisions.

"There is a formula, a real value system to what works," explains Dore Steinberg, a former music director at San Francisco's KKSF. "If you go off on a synth guitar solo that rocks out or your saxophone bleeps or you puncture that atmosphere for a moment, you either have to find an edit to get that out or it's not going to get play."

Artists pine for the good old days when these strict formulas did not exist. Ironically, Cody gave birth to the format in 1987, when he converted a Los Angeles album-oriented-rock station to KTWV, better known as the Wave. A home for music popular

with baby boomers that wasn't getting airplay elsewhere, the Wave boldly mixed Sting and Steely Dan, John Coltrane and Chick Corea, Yanni and Enya, Andy Narell and Mark Isham.

Other radio stations followed. By 1990, however, Arbitron ratings tumbled for many of them. Some stations dropped below a 2 share (meaning less than 2 percent of a city's radio listeners tuned in every quarter hour). BA, founded by Cody in 1988, moved in and aggressively marketed its research-based testing to flagging stations with stellar results. Ratings for client stations shot up from 2 to nearly 6. Today, most smooth jazz stations sit among the top 5 in their markets for radio's most coveted demographic, ages 25–54.

"We were playing a lot of music that was unimportant to the masses," says Allen Kepler, BA's vice president of programming. "We had a small group of

people that were happy, but the stations weren't functioning as successful businesses, and they weren't getting the ratings that you need to compete."

**b**roadcast Architecture successfully promoted a sea-change in radio programming. Instead of playing up to three cuts from one album, the industry moved to a singles format, whereby stations played one cut from a CD. Playlists shrank, leaving less slots for new songs and more competition for airplay. Stations ensured more spins each week for the artist. "It's the only way the listener can learn the song and learn to like it," Kepler says.

When asked to defend research and its impacts, station program directors do so on economic terms. "The way we keep our jobs in the programming department is we deliver ratings that our sales department can sell," says Paul Goldstein, vice president of programming at KKSF. "When you're paying \$100 million for a radio station, being in 10th place won't sell."

Like other programmers who enlist BA, Goldstein swears by testing but also insists KKSF tailor its playlist to his market's tastes—even though its playlist sounds indistinguishable from other smooth jazz stations. "BA does our research," he says. "They don't dictate what we play. We have

heated conversations and disagreements about these things."

According to Cody, BA's sacred, weekly playlist is the sum total of in-house research, feedback from client program directors throughout the country and, only then, lots of testing. But is playing 10 seconds of music for a carefully pre-screened group of people the way to get out of 10th place? "Absolutely," Kepler says. Most people make up their mind about a song within two to three seconds, especially familiar ones, he says.

Kepler, Cody and others say they like adventurous music; it just doesn't test well and won't sell ads.

Critics argue that the tests unwittingly halt cultural progress. "In the course of history, the people that have had the biggest impact are the people that rock the boat," Ferrante says. "They're not the people who deliver the easy things. They're the people who saw things from a really different angle. I don't think we move forward unless we have that."

"It's not a joke," Metheny bristles. "It's not about getting people to tap their foot or that kind of stuff. If I was going to do that, I'd be writing jingles for McDonald's."

Some program directors, such as Carol Handley of Seattle's KWJZ, who begrudgingly accepted testing, lament the changes. "While we understand what is

helping to make our particular radio station successful, there's also a piece of your heart that goes out there, when you love and believe in a piece of music and you find out your audience doesn't," Handley says. "And that's the hard part."

Others see it only from the bottom line. "I don't think our role is to be the ones who break new artists or be adventurous," says Nick Francis, program director of KYOT in Phoenix. "People have a responsibility to themselves if they want to be cultured."

Where do now-banned artists go for airplay? Kepler suggests specialty shows or public radio, where mainstream jazz has flourished since KJAZ in Alameda, Calif.—the country's last commercial all-jazz FM station—went off the air in 1994 (KRML in Carmel, Calif., is an AM jazz station, as is KZJZ, opened in St. Louis in 1997). But even public radio, reeling from federal funding crises, is feeling the pinch and turning to market testing.

"We're in a very funny spot," Metheny says, "because all of the so-called jazz stations have gone completely to a format that's just as restrictive. They either play only avant garde or mainstream or a little of both." **DB**

*Part II of this feature, in next month's issue, will focus on applications of listener testing to mainstream jazz radio.*

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# Market Consolidation Spurs Conservative Play

The economics of American big business rests at the core of today's smooth jazz programming. Just as it's hit the banking and oil industries, merger mania has swept through the radio industry. When companies merge into large conglomerates, they increase their debt and must answer immediately to their shareholders.

Merger mania began when Congress passed the Telecommunications Act of 1996. It allowed companies to buy more than one radio station in a city, where before deregulation, companies wouldn't risk buying a smooth jazz station as their sole investment. The ratings didn't pay off, said George Nadel Rivin, partner with Miller, Kaplan, Arase & Co., a Los Angeles-based firm that analyzes broadcast revenue.

Now larger media conglomerates can build a bigger piece of the Arbitron rating pie by owning more slices. For instance, Chancellor Media Corp. owns stations in 23 markets with an average of six stations each in the top 10 markets, according to Securities and Exchange Commission reports. These include every known format, including news-talk, oldies, adult contemporary, urban contemporary, classic rock, country and classical. They also own Broadcast Architecture.

In August 1998, Chancellor announced plans to merge with Capstar Broadcasting Corp. If the deal gets approval from shareholders and the SEC, expected in April or May,

Chancellor will become the nation's largest radio network with 463 radio stations in 105 markets, edging out CBS/Westinghouse, which owns KTWV, the Wave, in Los Angeles.

The \$4 billion purchase will also jump Chancellor's debt from \$1.9 billion to \$4 billion, said Joe Jaffoni, Chancellor spokesman. Carrying massive debt focuses all eyes on the bottom line. Station owners must answer to stockholders, which translates into less risky programming, Rivin says.

Media critic and former Washington Post reporter Ben Bagdikian decries the whole trend. "You get a lot of reduced quality," said Bagdikian, author of *The Media Monopoly*, the 1983 tome that criticized the consolidation of media ownership. "The public, the musicians, the public taste and, ultimately, [the companies] themselves [suffer] because they all start sounding alike. So they increase the competition and get into this self-worsening cycle."

Broadcast Architecture CEO Frank Cody disagrees. If anything, Cody argues, deregulation has diversified the airwaves and allowed jazz to reach more listeners.

"There has never been more jazz sold than in recent years," Cody said. "The category of jazz has skyrocketed, and most of that is smooth jazz. We can't really have it both ways. We can't have it be successful and have it be obscure."  
—C.L.



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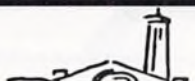
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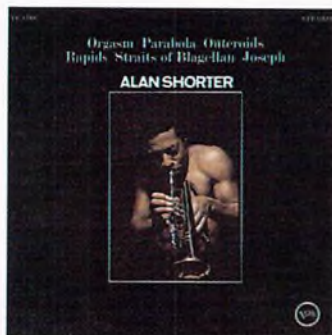
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## Alan Shorter

**Orgasm**  
Verve 314 557 094

★★★★

Alan Shorter only made two records as a leader, both of them extremely hard to find. I'd searched in vain for this little lost free-jazz gem for years, certain that it would never be reissued, when much to my surprise and delight Verve included it in their limited Elite Edition series, making one of the rarest and most unusual items of their catalogue temporarily available for today's connoisseur of first-wave creative music.

Shorter's brief flash on the scene was in part eclipsed by his brother's ascendancy, though Wayne was supportive and included him (and one of his tunes) on *The All-Seeing Eye* (Blue Note) in 1965. Three years later, Alan assembled a quartet with sand-blasting saxist Gato Barbieri, Ornette-alum Charlie Haden on bass and Muhammad Ali—similarly, a wonderful player overshadowed by his brother, Rashied—on drums. God knows what possessed Verve to contract the group, which would clearly have been more at home on ESP or among Impulse!'s "new thing" albums. A clash with producer Esmond Edwards resulted in the rhythm section being switched mid-session, bringing bassist Reggie Johnson and Rashied on board. But on the evidence offered here, rather than tame the action-jazz beast for the label, Shorter seems to have pushed the music harder, making an extreme, not always successful, but consistently engrossing statement in the process.

Shorter's themes tend to consist of terse, bluesy, Coleman-like lines, though the music generally lacks freebop's element of in-time swinging. "Joseph" (which has extremely beautiful, contemporary sounding flugelhorn) and "Outeroids" are both meditative, composed pieces; they contrast with the roundhouse punch of energy unleashed elsewhere, providing a structural backbone for the program. The record's Achilles' heel is stripped-down ostinato on "Rapids": Johnson is made to play the same one-note Bo Diddley beat ad nauseum (10-plus minutes), dragging down an otherwise gripping piece. Nonetheless, the solos on this tune show what an original player Shorter was—shards of

Don Cherry; rather soft, genteel sound; anti-virtuosic; highly musical; a very personal way of shaping phrases—and what a force Barbieri could be, as well. In lesser moments little more than a blowhard, Gato is in excellent form on this date, building tension and dissipating it in furious, precisely executed, over-the-top hissy fits (hear "Straits Of Blagellan" for the primo example). The title track offers a more successful ostinato, a pattern unorthodoxly initiated by the bass and answered by the drums, opening out into a swirl of propulsive free percussion beneath an aggressive saxophone solo, intense flugel break and short, crude arco bass burst.

Not one for the desert isle, but a fascinating period piece and some very fine music well worth investigating.  
—John Corbett

**Orgasm:** Parabola; Joseph; Straits Of Blagellan; Rapids; Outeroids; Orgasm.

**Personnel:** Alan Shorter, flugelhorn, trumpet (4); Gato Barbieri, tenor saxophone; Charlie Haden (1, 6), Reggie Johnson (2-5), bass; Muhammad Ali (1, 6), Rashied Ali (2-5), drums.



## Ilhan Ersahin

**Our Song**  
Golden Horn 007

★★★½

Sounding well beyond his years, the Stockholm-born, Turkish-raised tenor saxophonist presents a balanced mix of post-bop swingers with ballads and a few fun, funky numbers on *Our Song*. Also look for *Home*, a very fine trio date with *Our Song* bandmates drummer Kenny Wolleson and bassist Larry Grenadier. Both albums sport only Ersahin compositions, songs that have been honed through years of steady gigging in New York (including a regular stint at Sweet Basil).

In addition to Grenadier (who plays on just one of the 10 tracks here) and Wolleson, there's keyboardist Jon Davis, bassist Doug Weiss and drummer Jeff Williams (on "She"). Most importantly, there's the significant presence of veteran trumpeter Eddie Henderson, whose sound lends weight to the ensemble passages and depth with his solos.

Ersahin's production has an odd, monaural sound to it. His playing is reminiscent of at times John Coltrane, Joe Henderson and Wayne

Shorter, while trumpeter Henderson time and again conjures up the sound of Miles Davis (check out his trills on "The Chief," a tune dedicated to tenorist Clifford Jordan and at times recalling certain lines, if not attitude, from Eddie Harris' "Freedom Jazz Dance"). A bonus: Jon Davis' use of Fender Rhodes on the funky stuff as well as the recommended coda to the album-closer "Time Out," which harkens back to the days when Miles used to add his "Theme" to the end of a live set.

There isn't a dud in the dough. And as long as Ersahin—who also has serious inclinations toward hip-hop, reggae and all-around world musics—continues to surround himself with top-flight players, the songs he writes and performs are bound to stir more than just a little interest.  
—John Ephland

**Our Song:** Our Song; Circles; Uzun; She Said; X; Peace/Variations On A Thought; She; The Chief (For Clifford Jordan); Late Blues; Time Out. (73:36)

**Personnel:** Ilhan Ersahin, tenor saxophone; Eddie Henderson, trumpet; Jon Davis, piano; Fender Rhodes; Doug Weiss, Larry Grenadier (3), bass; Kenny Wolleson, Jeff Williams (7), drums.



## Marcus Roberts

**The Joy Of Joplin**  
Sony Classical 60554

★★★★

Marcus Roberts wants to connect Joplin's music to the evolution of jazz piano and demonstrate the debt of today's generation to classic ragtime models.

But the music, though finely crafted and played with an improviser's zest and imagination, is of an earlier sensibility and, outside of a few musicological particulars noted by Roberts, doesn't seem to support any great notions of contemporary debt.

As Roberts clearly shows in these lively performances, Joplin and the ragtime spirit is its own best reward. In moving it from the turn of one century to the turn of another, he adroitly avoids comparisons with the players who have periodically rediscovered this music: Wally Rose, Eubie Blake (himself rediscovered), Dick Hyman, Joshua Rifkin. They concerned themselves with the Joplin texts (for letter-perfect Joplin, consult Hyman's 1975 *Complete Works*

For Piano on RCA Red Seal), and Roberts considers that work done. He's here to interpret. We hear eight Joplin pieces with sometimes idiosyncratic but never forced twists. "Maple Leaf Rag" sounds strikingly fresh. Complementing these are eight Roberts original extensions that imagine where Joplin might be today with the perspective and knowledge of a century's worth of jazz history behind him. (He died the year recorded jazz began, in 1917.)

"The Entertainer" starts off almost with a Count Basie-style pick-up, setting a tempo with percussive authority. Although Roberts' right hand veers into a swinging bop-influenced style after the principal themes, the feeling remains far more traditional with the left laying out a walking bass line without a comped chord in sight. Roberts infuses "Easy Winners" and other classics with a relaxed but potent dynamic movement, mostly within Joplin's essential format, punching out tenths like a staple gun and adding appropriate heat to Joplin's gentility.

Among Roberts' originals, "Play What You Hear" and "Play What's Written" are a bit overwrought considering the slight melodic material. And "Hidden Hues" seems to turn to vapor as it's played. But "Everything's Cool" is a little two-note modal figure that gives Roberts all he needs to spin out a full measure of the grace and rhythmic lilt of ragtime and stride. "Rags To Riches" (also referred in the booklet as "Rags To Rhythm") is an exciting and fast improv against a walking bass on the changes of "I Got Rhythm." It's a virtuoso turn of the kind that's second nature to players such as Dave McKenna and Ralph Sutton.

—John McDonough

**The Joy Of Joplin:** The Entertainer; Maple Leaf Rag; Everything's Cool; Hidden Hues; From Rags To Riches; The Easy Winners; Bethena's Waltz; Play What Your Hear; Play What's Written; The Joy Of Joplin; Magnetic Rag; Elite Syncopation; Before The Party Begins; After The Party's Over; Gladiolus Rag; A Real Slow Drag. (58:10)  
**Personnel:** Marcus Roberts, piano.



## Tim Hagans

### Animation/Imagination

Blue Note 95198

★★★½

**A**ppl asked about this new Tim Hagans disc when she saw it next to the CD player. Heard it was supposed to be, ahem, computronic, and wanted to find out whether it was a Ben Neill or a Graham Haynes kind of thing. For conversational purposes, the former means that robotics

can have a tuneful side as long as the music makes nice with abstraction. The latter implies that pining in a multiculti cosmos—a spin on what Julius Hemphill once called "homeboy tooting at the dogstar"—is one way of acting forlorn in a world where tomorrow is today. She was dubious when I said Hagans' collaboration with producer Bob Belden was more gripping and elaborate than either of those tacks, instead bringing the authoritative soloing of a chops-heavy improviser to a largely, ahem, technodelic domain. But when the laser took over, she was rocking.

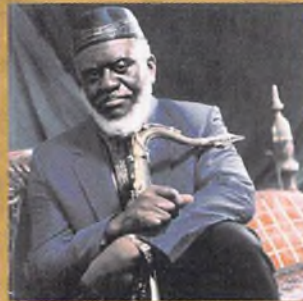
Hooked up with samplers, programmers and DJs, the 40-something trumpeter sounds like a guy enjoying a florid mid-life fantasy. I won't call it a crisis, because for the most part Hagans and associates seem amused by, and in control of, the clackety-clack that defines their decidedly impudent opus. Years ago, critic Howard Hampton spoke of music so aggressive it "spoke back to the deadness rotting away in passive lives." With roots in both early '70s Miles and modern jungle music, Hagans lets *Animation/Imagination* rip with a blend of swing and fusion that pulverizes timidity. And he breaks new ground without abandoning the crucial tenets of his previous work.

In conversation Belden says he hears the disc being more Freddie than Miles, and though there's a couple of parallels to lava-lamp riff discs like *Red Clay* and *Skydive*, what he's really talking about is the trumpeter's mix of brashness and brains. Hagans underscored both on his last acoustic disc *Audible Architecture*; get past the plugged-in facade here, and the same attention to line is obvious. He adjusts for mood—he wouldn't be the

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# THE HOT BOX

CDs	CRITICS	John McDonough	John Corbett	Jim Macnie	John Ephland
<b>ALAN SHORTER</b> <i>Orgasm</i>		★1/2	★★★★	★★1/2	★★★★
<b>ILHAN ERSAHIN</b> <i>Our Song</i>		★★★	★★1/2	★★★	★★★★1/2
<b>MARCUS ROBERTS</b> <i>The Joy Of Joplin</i>		★★★★	★★★1/2	★★★1/2	★★★★
<b>TIM HAGANS</b> <i>Animation/Imagination</i>		★★	★★★1/2	★★★1/2	★★★★

## CRITICS' COMMENTS

### ALAN SHORTER, *Orgasm*

Alan Shorter's clean, competent flugelhorn drills a dry hole in this trashy New Thing indulgence that came and went in the blink of a Schwann catalog, circa 1970. Barbieri seems to be under the influence of gastrointestinal distress. And how does the bass player stay awake, playing one note for 10 minutes ("Rapids"). Exceptional notes, though, by Amiri Baraka, a.k.a. LeRoi Jones.—JMD

Though a nifty artifact from the wide-open '60s, it's a bit clunky, and a bit immature. Its best moments come when the lyricism and punch of Brownie and Fats emerge in the trumpeter's lines, and Gato's horn bridges the gap between casual and chaotic.—JM

*Orgasm* is the most visible expression we have of Wayne Shorter's older brother, both as a flugelhornist and as a composer. On both counts, the results are satisfying. Shorter's writing style hinges on elements of free-jazz, but stays within the conventions of mainstream jazz, and is able to maintain a curious tension.—JE

### ILHAN ERSAHIN, *Our Song*

Cool, uncluttered (by piano) and polished, Ersahin's tenor and trio float through 11 mostly forgettable originals that serve their functions as predicates for contemporary improvisations that wing with an easy poise. The music is emotionally a little stand-offish, but satisfying. The rhythm section dispenses a copious inventory of time signatures, as if straight four-four had lost its chic.—JMD

Promising-sounding young tenor player; ordinary-sounding record. Save for a couple of more knotty tracks ("Piece/Variations On A Thought," "Uzun"), I'd head straight to his superior, quite strong trio disc *Home* (Golden Horn), recorded a year later.—JC

It's a noteworthy intro disc to the tenor saxist's myriad interests—Miles' quintet, boogaloo beats, outcast lines coying up to unk-fay. But it's no must-have. Ersahin's forebears loom large in his playing, and though he arranges their comings and goings with mucho craft, singularity is never fully attained.—JM

### MARCUS ROBERTS, *The Joy Of Joplin*

Genre-splicing Roberts seems like he might have been secretly taking lessons on pastichery from John Zorn, the Art Ensemble or Willem Breuker. Of course, cutting rags with stuff of other eras isn't altogether new, as fans of Muhal Richard Abrams and Dave Burrell well know. And when it comes to the art of today's rag, I'll take Reginald R. Robinson any day. But for what it is, *The Joy Of Joplin* is listenable and in places involving.—JC

He's relentless in his goal of futzing with the master's nuggets, so harmony and rhythm are reshuffled in every measure. But virtuosity somehow breeds convulsion when the pianist plays alone, and this recital is filled with incredible passages of technical skill that could benefit from a bit more flow.—JM

The best Roberts recording to date, primarily because his playing is the most expressive to date. Not content to stay in his own backyard of familiar props, the pianist goes beyond mere virtuosity and instead shows us he feels comfortable ruminating where the fences are less obvious. Yes, *The Joy Of Joplin* plays more like a "Masterworks" recording than a "jazz" album, given that Roberts simply added his own arrangements.—JE

### TIM HAGANS, *Animation/Imagination*

In his search to occupy virgin musical space and avoid the trap of repetition, Hagans has tumbled into the deeper trap of pretence. Techno weirdness for its own sake passed off as creativity may beguile a 17-year-old, at whom this is evidently targeted, but not more seasoned jazz ears. Too bad.—JMD

Hagans dives headlong into trip-hop, laying echoed-out, abrasive lines over fidgety electronic rhythm tracks. Strong waft of Miles on non-drum 'n' bass cuts and slow burners like "French Girl." Rare to hear a respected bopper risking his straight creds on a heavily produced dub concoction like this.—JC

There are some brilliant moments on this CD, like the transition from the open bop (à la *Miles Smiles*) of "The Original Drum And Bass" to "Animation/Imagination" (throw in the segues couched inside the latter). There is surprise, and an abruptness that somehow suggests continuity. The drum 'n' bass and techno mesh well in some spots and suggest a promising work in progress for trumpeter Hagans. Bob Belden's production is snappy, first-rate, and the repartees between him and Hagans are the best jammin' heard.—JE

improviser he is if he didn't—but he also makes mood walk his way. The idea is to turn a producer's music into a player's music.

That notion is implied in the curt opening flourish, "The Original Drum And Bass," which glows sans electronics. Basically it issues a challenge to the sequencer loops and drum files that follow: Can you act thoughtfully in the moment? Forging abrasion in some spots, securing refinement in others, the program steadily veers away from the one-dimensional. There are bubblegum ditties like "Hud Doyle.com," religious romances such as "Love's Lullaby" and some good old metal machine music: "I Heard You Were Dropped." The backgrounds give Hagans ample chance to blow—he's the most obvious voice on the disc—but Kurt Rosenwinkel's guitar and Belden's soprano each add to the well-sculpted synth collages.

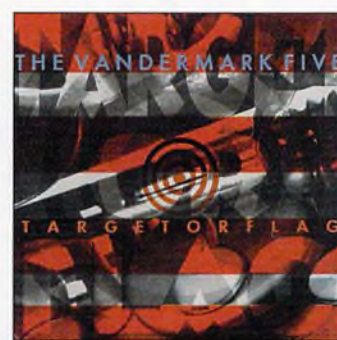
Sometimes dense, intermittently dreamy, Hagans and Belden make room for hyper funk as well as space swirl—the remix possibilities are endless here. And though it's beholding to quite a few forebears—*Birds Of Fire*, *On The Corner* and *Sweetnighter* all drop by for a pat on the back—an individuality is ultimately constructed.

It's not exactly illbient. So maybe you could call it wellbient. And it's a sizable well that Hagans drinks from. A handful of improvisers have tried to align drum 'n' bass with jazz, but most have proven themselves less than compelling soundscapists. With *Animation/Imagination* Hagans moves the game ahead a tad.

—Jim Macnie

**Animation/Imagination:** The Original Drum And Bass; Animation/Imagination; Slo Mo; 28 If; Snakes Kin; Far West; Hud Doyle.com; Love's Lullaby; I Heard You Were Dropped; Are You Threatening Me?; French Girl; Trumpet Sandwich; What They Don't Tell You About Jazz. (67:18)

**Personnel:** Tim Hagans, trumpet; Bob Belden, soprano sax and reversed acoustic piano; Kurt Rosenwinkel, guitar; Scott Kinsey, synthesizers and programmers; David Dyson, electric piano and electric bass; Billy Kilson, drums, bass programmer and electric bass; Mathew Backer, programmer; Kevin Hays, piano, electric piano, Fender Rhodes and programming; Ira Coleman, acoustic bass; DJ Kingsize, drum and bass programmer; DJ Smash, synthesizer and programmer.



## The Vandermark Five

### Target Or Flag

Atavistic 106

★★★★½

About six years ago, when saxophonist Ken Vandermark began playing in Chicago clubs, he had a nonpareil vision and unstoppable energy. Vandermark saw how the dynamics of such European improvisers as Evan Parker and Peter Brötzmann could coex-

ist with funk plans designed by James Brown and George Clinton. Just as significant as Vandermark causing these disparate elements to gel, without sounding like a cut-and-paste exercise, is his all-too-rare sense of humor. His solid compositions on *Target Or Flag* allow his quintet to absorb these ideas and deliver them with resolute precision.

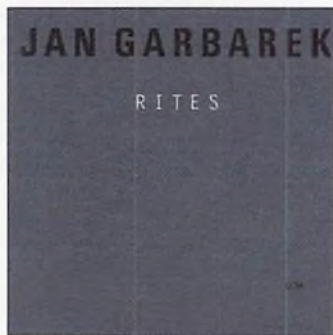
Vandermark knows the value of a working band, and the unit on this disc is the most cohesive that he's led. While he and saxophonist Mars Williams unravel their share of exciting freeblowing, the dynamics of group interplay—especially the resolve of bassist Kent Kessler and drummer Tim Mulvenna—lend some restraints to these investigations. So the group moves through the tempo shifts in such pieces as "Attempted, Not Known" with a real sense of singularity. That piece also features a wild unaccompanied trombone solo from Jeb Bishop, who later on propels "Last Call" with a heated funky guitar lead. Vandermark is also inventive enough to keep everything harmonically challenging during charming slower tunes, such as his fine ballad "The Start Of Something."

*Target Or Flag* shows that while Vandermark's saxophone aerodynamics brought him an audience initially, it's his writing andandleading skills that will build his lasting impact.

—Aaron Cohen

**Target Or Flag:** Sucker Punch; Attempted, Not Known; The Start Of Something; Super Opaque; Last Call; New Luggage. (68:02)

**Personnel:** Ken Vandermark, clarinets, tenor saxophone; Mars Williams, saxophones; Jeb Bishop, trombone, guitar; Kent Kessler, bass; Tim Mulvenna, drums.



## Jan Garbarek

Rites  
ECM 1685/86

★★★★

Meant as a major statement by Jan Garbarek, who came to the attention of the jazz world through his work with George Russell in the late '60s and Keith Jarrett in the '70s, *Rites* is replete with the plaintive sound of Garbarek's soprano sax as it coasts over lush synth washes and flutters among choir boys. There are bird calls, street noises and surf sounds; songs from both Scandinavian and Amerindian folklore as well as works by Don Cherry and Georgian composer Jansug Kakhidze; plus reworkings of Garbarek's decade old compositions. Producer Manfred Eicher's exquisite miking makes for a lushness unsurpassed.

The title track, with its sonic collage, owes more to the backing tracks of Fleetwood Mac's "Tusk" than to *A Love Supreme*. "One Ying For Every Yang," with its smooth-jazz melody played over Rainer Brüninghaus' electro-rhythmic pulse, and "Her Wild Ways," with Brüninghaus at the piano, owe more to the soprano sax sound of Kenny G. than Garbarek's original inspiration, John Coltrane. But the latter two are sonic wallpaper while the former is a catchy little number. "Vast Plain, Clouds" is a lush, power ballad awaiting its diva.

Garbarek's mastery of these wide-ranging styles is impressive. He leads the mind awander with sensual, meditative music to escape into. Don't let the tastefully designed packaging with its portrait of the thoughtful artist, the lyrics to

"The Moon Over Mtatsminda" illegibly printed in not one but three languages, enigmatic photos—even the titles of disc one's tracks 2, 3 and 4, when properly redivided, make a charming classical haiku—fool you into thinking this is some sort of New Age confection. —Dave Helland

**Rites:** (Disc 1) Rites; Where The Rivers Meet; Vast Plain, Clouds; So Mild The Wind, So Meek The Water; Song, Tread Lightly; It's OK To Listen To The Gray Voice; Her Wild Ways; (Disc 2) It's High Time; One Ying For Every Yang; Pan; We Are The Stars; The Moon Over Mtatsminda; Malinye; The White Clown; Evenly They Danced; Last Rite. (48:51/49:23)

**Personnel:** Jan Garbarek, soprano and tenor saxes, synthesizers, samplers, percussion; Rainer Brüninghaus, piano (1/4), keyboard (1/3; 2/2,7); Eberhard Weber, bass (1/3,4,6,7; 2/7); Marilyn Mazur, drums (1/4,6,7; 2/6-7), percussion (1/2,5); Jansug Kakhidze, vocals, conductor Tbilisi

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## Ari Brown

### Venus

Delmark 504

★★★★

**D**uring the past two years, saxophonist Ari Brown has diligently built on his newfound recognition as a leader. After working for Elvin Jones, Anthony Braxton, Kahil El'Zabar and Lester Bowie, Brown released his impressive debut, *Ultimate Frontier*, in '96. He plays almost weekly in Chicago's Velvet Lounge, and his '70s jazz-funk band the Awakening reformed for a solid appearance at this past summer's Chicago Jazz Festival (meanwhile, their reissues have become hip). All of this activity emanates

from the background on his *Venus* disc, which conveys overwhelming emotional immediacy.

The centerpiece to the disc is Brown's 13-minute title piece, which he composed in memory of his girlfriend, Latin dancer Venus Blue, who died last year. "Venus" begins with his moving unaccompanied tenor wail, and then the piece dramatically changes tempo while he retains this feeling. Brown's brother, Kirk, introduces a Latin clave pattern on the piano, while bassist Josef Ben Israel, drummer Avreeayl Ra and guest African- and Latin-inspired percussionists join in. The bent and slurred notes that Ari Brown plays above ostensibly joyful rhythms result in a resounding cry of anguish and hope.

There's a lot of underlying warmth throughout *Venus*. Much can be made about how, like Rahsaan Roland Kirk, Brown is one of the few saxophonists in jazz history who can play more than one reed simultaneously without becoming a novelty act. But they also share the strong gospel and r&b inclinations that, in a better world, would put both of them in heavy rotation on jazz airwaves. My pick for Brown's potential radio single would be "Oh What A World We're Living In." His heavy tenor that veers into dissonance at the right moments above Kirk Brown's spiritual-tinged chords recall the vibe of David Murray and Dave Burrell's great pairings from a decade ago.

Ari Brown astutely uses the same dynamic core rhythm section from *Ultimate Frontier*. Kirk Brown's composition "Quiet Time" is a fine subtle display of his own talents as a soloist. No doubt that when Kirk Brown makes his own breakthrough disc, brother Ari should return some favors.

—Aaron Cohen

**Venus:** Oui Lee; Trane's Example; Roscoe; Venus; Quiet Time; Baldhead Gerald; Oh What A World We're Living In; Rahsaan In The Serengeti. (64:06)

**Personnel:** Ari Brown, tenor saxophone, alto saxophone (3, 8), soprano saxophone (8); Kirk Brown, piano; Josef Ben Israel, bass; Avreeayl Ra, d'ums; Art "Turk" Burton, congas (4, 6, 8), bongos (8); Enoch, shakere (4), djembe (8); Thaddeus Expose, bass (8).



## Mark Turner

### In This World

Warner Bros. 47074

★★★★

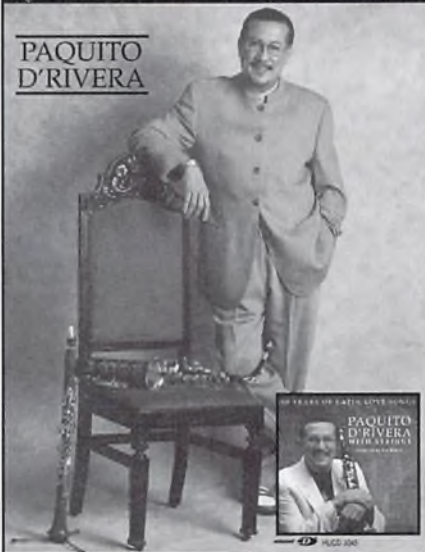
**I**n the liner notes to Mark Turner's *In This World*, pianist Brad Mehldau speaks with such authority and intimacy about the music that one would be a fool not to pay attention, and perhaps steal a few lines here and there. Particularly pertinent are his terms "crunchy impressionism" and "achy, suffused longing."

Turner's tunes—and most of the tunes are his compositions—are not so much complicated as they are intricate, if you get my drift. On first hearing, especially the parallel runs and unison forays, I was reminded of early Ornette Coleman and Don Cherry, wondering how in the world they could stay fused on such quick and seemingly challenging lines. Whether it's Mehldau on piano or Fender Rhodes or guitarist Kurt Rosenwinkel kicking out fantastic chromatics to keep up with Turner, the results are the same—painterly exhibitions that are embracingly fresh and inviting.

This is the motif for "Mesa" and "Lennie Groove," but Turner changes the pace and texture of things on Duke Pearson's "You Know I

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Care." In his gorgeous cadenza, Turner offers practically the full tonal capacity of his horn, but never in a showy way. Not only do you gather a notion about the range of his technical prowess, you can hear the deep thinking artist at work, reworking some time-worn options, substituting some changes with new relationships, new concatenations. All of this is sweetly blended in a lovely portrait that I hope convinces Turner to try a few more romantic ballads next time around.

Pretty ballads are fine, but Turner is a straightahead action-oriented player, in the best sense of the word. It was good to hear the nice swing on "Barcelona," and the pepped up tempo on "Days Of Wine And Roses" was a pleasant surprise.

The CD's title tune was an opportunity to hear the entire band go at it under, well, crunchy impressionism. Brian Blade demonstrates for the umpteenth time why he is among the amazing young percussionists of the moment. Joining bassist Larry Grenadier, Blade gives the three front men all the rhythmic canvass they need to apply broad strokes of sound, swooshes of colorful tones. "Bo Brussels" is a miniature version of the same act, with a little less crunch.

Turner is an excellent composer with a new way of assembling the traditional parts. Moreover, he has the skill and dexterity to make it all happen. Bravo and encore!

—Herb Boyd

**In This World:** Mesa; Lennie Groove; You Know I Care; The Long Road; Barcelona; In This World; Days of Wine And Roses; Bo Brussels; She Said, She Said. (60:10)

**Personnel:** Mark Turner, tenor saxophone; Brad Mehldau, piano (1, 2, 3, 5, 7), and Fender Rhodes (4, 6, 9); Larry Grenadier, bass; Brian Blade, drums; Jorge Bossy, additional drums (5, 9); Kurt Rosenwinkel, guitar (6, 8, 9).



## Les McCann

**How's Your Mother?**

32 Jazz 32088

★★★★

A previously unreleased treasure, *How's Your Mother?* is an old recording that shows Les McCann in a new light. Recorded live at the Village Vanguard in 1967, two years before his legendary encounter with saxophonist Eddie Harris, McCann was gaining notoriety as a trio leader. While funky as ever, McCann reveals his sensitive side with a song list that favors ballads and slowish grooves.

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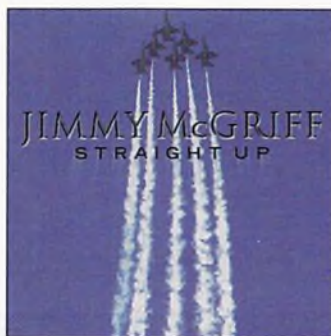
Typically up-tempo pop tunes of the times are recast as pensive ballads. Namely, "Sunny," "Love For Sale" and "Goin' Out Of My Head" are given haunting interpretations, slow in tempo, yes, but not lacking in excitement. With the timing of a good standup comic, McCann knows how to generate heat without playing a million notes. He does it with accents, dynamics, swelling trills and warm, bluesy phrases. And mostly, he does it with rhythm. Drummer Frank Severino and bassist Leroy Vinnegar are right in the pocket with him. It's a pocket ignited with a hard sense of swing, punctuated with stabs and snare shots that drive their points home.

While the slow pieces stand out, not all is balladry. McCann does some serious testifying on a fire-and-brimstone take of "I Am In Love" that features dramatic breakdowns and a sly reference to "Once In A Lifetime." And of the slower numbers, not all fit the mold of ballad per se. Exploring an Eastern vein, McCann solos at length over an Arabic scale on a vamp called "Doin' That Thing." It shows yet another side of his musical self, though it yields some of the album's duller moments, too, the occasional lull where one wishes McCann would hurry up and meet Harris.

The gig was recorded by George Klabin, who was at the time a Columbia University student and radio programmer. The sound is intimate and begs no gripes, though some listeners might prefer that McCann's vocalizations were left unheard. (Like Keith Jarrett, McCann could be called a "grunter.") Aside from that, *How's Your Mother?* is a fine trio performance that catches McCann at a creative moment early in his career. —John Janowiak

**How's Your Mother?:** Love For Sale; I Can Dig It; Doin' That Thing; I Am In Love; Goin' Out Of My Head; Sunny; Blues; Blues 5: The Shampoo. (49:41)

**Personnel:** Les McCann, piano; Frank Severino, drums; Leroy Vinnegar, bass.



## Jimmy McGriff

### Straight Up

Milestone MCD 9285 2

★★★½

Music centered around a funky organ player lends itself to an array of culinary allusions: The recipe calls for standards from the worlds of jazz, Tin Pan Alley and pop, prepared as soul shouts or breathy ballads, stirred with dance floor rhythms for strutting or romancing. Its blues are "greasy," solos "cook" over the changes, the drummer's propulsive

shuffle is "simmering." Once, this jazzy dish was served up in its own string of venues: the Chicken Circuit, named after the fried delight featured on these clubs' menus.

But this is music, not for sitting and digesting, but for getting up and moving. *Straight Up* features a front line—organist Jimmy McGriff and pair of tenors, Frank Wess and David "Fathead" Newman—adept at hopscoching back and forth over the lines that separate blues and jazz, gospel and r&b. They're supported by drummer Bernard Purdie, heartbeat of countless recording dates led by everyone from James Brown and Aretha Franklin to Louis Armstrong and Dizzy Gillespie, and a pair of guitarists.

The grooves vary but largely remain danceable throughout. McGriff plays the jaunty "Doin' My Thing" over Purdie's shuffle. Then the soloists, first Wess, then guitarist Rodney Jones, followed by Newman and McGriff, swing it at a medium tempo. Newman hands off the melody "It Had To Be You" to Wess, then takes the first solo, never breaking out of a dance motion.

Purdie's funk intro to the title track sets up a slow, slinky groove with guitarist Wayne Boyd. Wess and Newman play flutes in unison then divide into melody and harmony lines. "Blues For The Baby Grand" is a blues for strutting with a Messengers' soul; McGriff takes the first finger-popping solo but Jones shines with his fleet-fingered runs. McGriff's cover of the Isley Brothers' hit "It's Your Thing" is butt-shakin' music. Once it might have been a two-sided juke box hit; now, it's a rich source to be sampled. The disc ends with "Oleo" played as funky swing featuring a Jones fleet-fingered solo. —Dave Holland

**Straight Up:** Doin' My Thing; It Had To Be You; Straight Up; Blues For The Baby Grand; It's Your Thing; Dream; Brother Griff; Oleo. (62:04)

**Personnel:** Jimmy McGriff, Hammond B-3 organ; David "Fathead" Newman, Frank Wess, tenor sax, flute; Rodney Jones (2.4.6.7.8), Wayne Boyd (1.3.5), guitar; Bernard Purdie, drums.

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## Jon Mayer Trio

### Do It Like This

A-Records 73129

★★★½

Many give up the jazz life because of its rigors and hazards. Some come back. Jon Mayer hung around the fringes of the New York scene as a teenager in the '50s. He replaced Bill Evans in the Tony Scott Quartet, gigged with Chet Baker in Paris, briefly accom-

panied Sarah Vaughan in the '60s and Dionne Warwick in the '70s, and toured with Manhattan Transfer for a year and a half. Then he dropped off everyone's radar screen.

Mayer returned to full-time music in 1991 when he moved to Los Angeles. *Do It Like This* is his second recording under his own name, and it bursts with the joy in music of someone who almost lost it forever. Mayer comes from the rhythm-derived, extroverted pianistic culture of Horace Silver and Red Garland. He breaks no new ground, but his consolidation of hard-bop dialects is satisfying because it is gut-level honest, full of feeling and swings like the devil.

The nicely balanced program contains four originals. Two are recent ("Shari's Bolero" and the title track), and two come from Mayer's first musical life 40 years ago ("Randy's Tune," for Randy Weston, and "Ballad For Trane"). There are two standards, and two pieces rescued from undeserved obscurity ("Azul Serape," composed by Victor Feldman for Cannonball Adderley, and Horace Silver's "Out Of The Night Came You"). Guest tenor saxophonist Ernie Watts contributes a stately yet fervent waltz, "Lonely Hearts."

*Do It Like This* provides amiable, stimulating company. Pieces like "Randy's Tune" and "Like Someone In Love" make you feel good all over with their relaxed momentum and deep groove. Mayer takes "If I Should Lose You" alone, and his halting, blockish progress discovers the song's innermost emotional resonance.

The moments of highest intensity come with the entrances of Watts on three numbers. Watts is one of the great sidemen in jazz (whose own albums, for mysterious reasons, rarely generate the excitement that he injects into the projects of others). On "Lonely Hearts," Watts calls and cries out the theme with passion held barely in check. "Shari's Bolero" is Mayer's song for his wife. The composer trusts Watts to tell the story in his voice of dark fire.

—Thomas Conrad

**Do It Like This:** Azul Serape; Lonely Hearts; If I Should Lose You; Like Someone In Love; Shari's Bolero; Randy's Tune; Do It Like This; Ballad For Trane; Out Of The Night Came You. (53:25)  
**Personnel:** Jon Mayer, piano; Bob Maize, bass; Harold Mason, drums; Ernie Watts, tenor saxophone (2, 5), alto saxophone (7).

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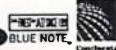
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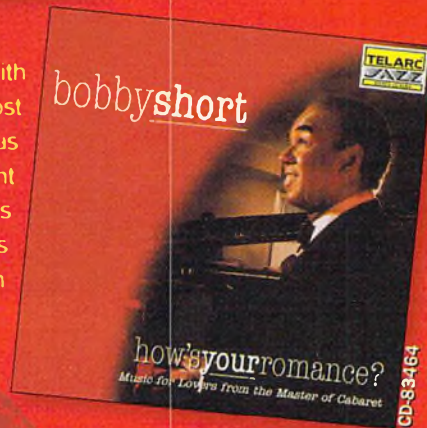


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# JAZZ

## The Face Of The Bass

by Ted Panken

**B**ack in the day, the sexual peccadillos of public men were private matters, if you were 6'7" you played forward or center, and bassist-led record dates were an eyebrow-raising oddity. Times have changed. Bassists can have it all—keep the foundation, write and improvise like a horn player.

**Christian McBride: *A Family Affair*** (Verve 314 557 554; 66:02) ★★★★★ World-class improvisers steeped in millennial complexities often sound like slummers from the ivory tower when addressing the music of the street. Not so on *A Family Affair*, McBride's paean to the '70s, balancing cool refinement, deep soul and fiery improvising. Producer George Duke steers clear of common denominators, creating structures in which the bass wunderkind—plugged and unplugged—can work his magic. The first two tracks—a good-time second-line stomp and a McBride love lyric sung by Will Downing—don't do much, but once we hit the Sly Stone title song, the soul express starts rolling. Almost every track features McBride's incisive solos, while tenorist Tim Warfield impresses with cogent burnout on Kool & the Gang's "Open Sesame" and mellow-toned architectural abstractions on "Wayne's World."

**Rodney Whitaker: *Hidden Kingdom*** (DIW-929; 67:09) ★★★ The 30-year-old Detroit native confirms that he's a bandleader-composer of high aspiration and substance. He gathers a group of strong personalities performing primarily three-horn charts in rotating configurations, and gives them space to wail. James Carter is in prime form throughout; he tears through and beyond what the soprano is supposed to be able to do on Whitaker's "Open Hit," and declaims tenor sermons on Cassius Richmond's "First Impressions" and Whitaker's arrangement of Oscar Pettiford's "Blues In The Closet." Counterstating Carter is Ron Blake, embodying relaxation and elegance on Whitaker's set-opener "Childhood." Marcus Belgrave, a patriarch of Motor City improvising, contributes state-of-the-art mute playing on Richmond's "Repentance" and Whitaker's "Mastery

Through Love." An egalitarian, confident, affirmative session.

**Eddie Gomez: *Dedication*** (Evidence 22208; 51:40) ★★★★★ On *Dedication*, Gomez's first trio recording in some years, Gomez pulls out all the stops with a passionate program, affirming his creativity as both accompanist and soloist. Jimmy Cobb's command and efficiency on the trapset match the 54-year-old Gomez beat-for-beat, while lesser-known Stefan Karlsson, a strong, learned pianist, solos with compositional acumen and imagination. Nothing conceptually innovative, just luscious music-making by masters who listen.



Mark Helias: the music's faithful liege

**Drew Gress' *Jagged Sky: Heyday*** (Black Saint 121314; 69:59) ★★★ On *Heyday*, the recording debut of his ensemble Jagged Sky (Dave Binney, alto sax; Ben Monder, guitar; Kenny Wolleson, drums), Gress throws in everything but the kitchen sink. Which isn't such a bad thing; after all, the 38-year-old bassist is a paradigm of versatility amongst contemporary improvisers, equally fluent playing changes with Fred Hersch or Marc Copland or free-form on extended structures with, say, Tim Berne—he has a lot to say and many sources to draw from. But with so much information, the music doesn't always have room to breathe, and

Gress' voice is muted. The bassist communicates more through his pen (or Mac) than his instrument; his strong solos (see "Beeline") seem almost an afterthought. Challenging music, performed with panache and brio; let's see what Gress does next time he brings an ensemble into the studio.

**Mark Helias, *Open Loos: Come Ahead Back ...*** (Koch 7861; 49:46) ★★★★★ Conceptual rigor and joie de vivre blend felicitously in Mark Helias' music, qualities communicated to the max on *Come Ahead Back ...*. Trio mates Ellery Eskelin on tenor sax and Tom Rainey on drums are individualists adept at thinking on their feet in sync, able to switch roles at a moment's notice, equally comfortable in the open field or working within a lane. Helias presents a balanced six-course menu, opening with "Semaphore," a loose high-velocity aperitif that gets the juices flowing. That segues to the lively blues-with-a-twist "Line Nine," morphs into open-form rubato with "The Other Brother," hurtles into free-bop with "Boppo," decrescendos into nuanced three-way improv on "Case Sensitive," and concludes on a deep groove with the African-inflected vamp-to-free "Last One In, First One Out." Helias imprints his personality on the flow with light touch; secure in his virtuosity, he's the music's faithful liege.

**William Parker: *The Peach Orchard*** (AUM 010/11; 69:21/67:11) ★★★; ***Lifting The Sanctions*** (No More 6; 71:46) ★★★★★ Bulwark of New York's post-Ayler improvisers for a quarter-century, Parker knows a thing or two about sustaining interest in extended structures. He listens acutely, carves a slab-solid sound and a mighty groove, and conjures dark melodic shapes. Those qualities resound throughout *The Peach Orchard*, comprising performances from four concerts over a year in the life of Parker's excellent quartet (altoist Rob Brown, pianist Cooper Moore, drummer Susie Ibarra). The two-hour-plus program cuts through a broad swath of Taylorian tropes, tongue-speak to elegiac incantation; the playing is consistent, often inspired ("Leaf Dance," "In Order To Survive"). The whole package is a mixed bag, freedom leading as easily to cliché as transcendence. When hurled into the open sea, even the strongest swimmer may founder—or scamper to the nearest boat. Parker conquers Neptune's vastness on the solo-bass *Lifting The Sanctions*. What's remarkable isn't his mastery of extended techniques or singular vocabulary, but the way he makes technique transparent. He creates a heroic 67-minute real-time sound painting that goes by in a blink. **DB**

# BEYOND Outlaws

by Jon Andrews

Is there hope for country music? Has the music of Hank Williams and Bob Wills devolved irreversibly into the shallow, formulaic commodity churned out from Nashville today? Listen to country radio and search in vain for any complexity, emotional or otherwise. But there are alternatives. A cadre of young insurgents operates under banners like "alt.country" and "Americana," joining veterans who've rejected the Nashville empire, thriving on the fringes of the mainstream. The following CDs shun songs about cheatin' in honkytonks, line-dancing and big hats.

**Lyle Lovett: *Step Into This House* (Curb/MCA 11831; 44:18/36:04) ★★★½** Lovett writes songs so well-suited to his quirky humor and deadpan delivery, it's hard to imagine anyone else singing them. This 2-CD set offers insights into his influences, as Lovett performs songs by 10 songwriters, including the late Townes Van Zandt, but no originals. Eccentric, playful tunes like Steven Fromholtz's "Bears" and Willis Alan Ramsey's "Sleepwalking" fit Lovett's wry, rueful persona perfectly. Four Walter Hyatt songs are the revelation of the set, including the Texas swing of "Teach Me About Love" and the wistful, jazzy "Babes In The Woods." Other songs force Lovett out of his comfort zone, often with mixed results.

**Willie Nelson: *Teatro* (Island 314-524 548; 50:26) ★★★★★** Nelson broke away from the Nashville monolith a quarter-century ago, but the atmospheric *Teatro* is his most "progressive" work in years. Producer Daniel Lanois, who's given Emmylou Harris and Bob Dylan sonic make-overs in recent

years, surrounds Nelson with a spare, haunting ambiance suggesting a ghost-town cantina. Harris' backing vocals shadow Nelson on most tracks, with a somewhat ghostly effect. Featuring two drummers, but no bass, Lanois' mix suggests open spaces, but emphasizes percussion, especially on the upbeat "Three Days" and "Darkness On The Face Of The Earth." These rhythms owe more to New Orleans than Nashville. Nelson sings about lost loves and sinners beyond redemption, and his understated delivery conveys worlds of heartbreak and regret. Two instrumentals feature Nelson's very effective work on acoustic guitar.



Emmylou Harris: heart-felt, charismatic performances

**Emmylou Harris: *Spyboy* (Eminent 25001; 62:03) ★★★½** Harris has always walked a line between traditional country/bluegrass and crossover audiences. *Spyboy* was recorded on tour in support of her (Lanois-produced) *Wrecking Ball* CD. These heart-felt, charismatic performances strike a cautious balance between the edgy, atmospheric *Wrecking Ball* sound and reassuring familiar tunes. Several tracks present Harris' fervent vocals with minimal backing from electric and acoustic guitars. Buddy Miller, another "new traditionalist," is a standout on

lead guitar, achieving a textured sound on electric guitar for "Deeper Well" and Lanois' spiritual "The Maker." This enjoyable set steps back from the risk-taking of *Wrecking Ball*. I would have preferred to hear more radical interpretations of some of her older tunes to utilize the strengths of her new band.

**Son Volt: *Wide Swing Tremolo* (Warner Bros. 9 47059; 45:37) ★★★★★** Son Volt injects vitality and new blood into the moribund genre of country-rock. Their vocal harmonies and jangly guitars may recall the Byrds (circa Gram Parsons) or early R.E.M., but Son Volt also deploys distorted electric guitars, aggressive drumming and other devices of '90s alternative rock alongside fiddle and slide guitar. The most prominent of the "alt.country" bands, they move adeptly between the amplified distortion and rock beat of "Straightface" to the pastoral acoustic sound of "Hanging Blue Side," which features pedal steel guitar. "Strands" ranks with the group's best songs, centered on an alluring riff and a spare arrangement evocative of open plains. Jay Farrar's songs favor oblique lyrics, and his delivery expresses loss and yearning without sentimentality.

**Gillian Welch: *Hell Among The Yearlings* (Almo Sounds 80021; 39:04) ★★★★★** Welch's songs conjure traditional roots themes, but there's nothing quaint or nostalgic about this CD. These bleak, compelling miniatures are largely devoted to stories about death, the devil and worldly troubles. *Hell Among The Yearlings* is even darker and more spare in its instrumentation than her debut, *Revival* (Almo Sounds, 1996). With writing partner David Rawlings adding guitar and backing vocals, the chiming guitars, delicate interplay and vocal harmonies may seem too pretty to support grim lyrics like those of "Caleb Mayer" and "One Morning." Welch keeps the program varied, playing banjo on several tracks, and lightens the mood with rockabilly on "Honey Now" and with the exquisite longing expressed in "Whiskey Girl" and "My Morphine." **DB**



We've been a band for four years now. Even so, we are only just beginning to get to the point where I feel like we have a real past on which we can build. In the process we learn what it means to play music, communicate with an audience and make documents along the way. You, the listener, are an integral and essential part of it all. Thanks for joining us in that process. Ellery Eskelin



In their duo, Solal's gift to Konitz is a liberation from ... inherent restrictions. This in turn inspires Konitz to follow his own lyrical impulses to the extreme—listen to how often he stretches his line to the breaking point. This is improvisation that goes far beyond merely altered chords or variations on a theme.



Of course, Background Music isn't straight cool jazz. Gregorio: "I've been trying to combine that sound" - THE sound - "with new musical concepts, not ones from the '40s and '50s." Here we find a sort of intersection of certain materials from low-dynamic modern jazz with the methods and certain other materials from European improvised music. Spontaneous cool, curdling with instant heat. A new, West Coast free improvisation.

## REISSUES

# Beauty & The Beast

by John Ephland

In just under four years, from December 1961 to September 1965, saxophonist **John Coltrane** took his sound, his band and his outlook through a metamorphosis unlike any jazz has seen to this day. He left a lot of listeners in the dust, out in the cold or just plain disgusted. Others, some of them brand-new fans, saw and heard an inspirational beauty. Coltrane cut a swath a mile wide, changing forever the way we hear a saxophone, and a saxophone solo, for better or worse. The studio recordings with drummer Elvin Jones, pianist McCoy Tyner and bassist Jimmy Garrison give us the picture away from the bandstand, a picture that, while more contained, ironically, led to more experimentation toward this band's journey's end.

**The Classic Quartet—Complete Impulse! Studio Recordings (Impulse! 8-280; 73:58/69:17/73:57/67:31/72:54/63:18/52:23/51:29)**

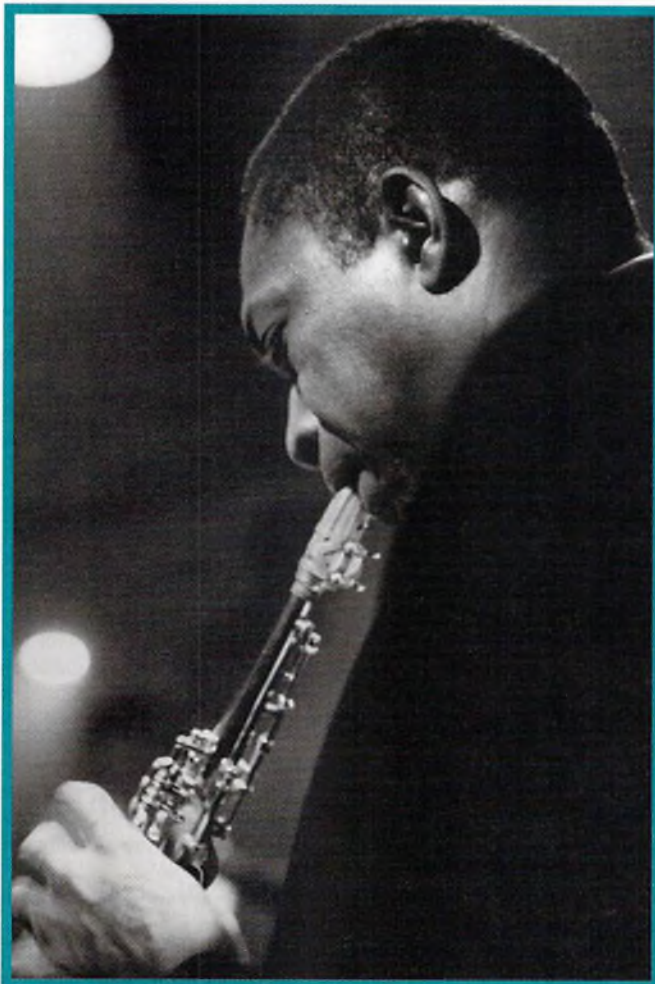
★★★★★ It may seem a rather ho-hum way to start this set with a December 1961 mono recording of "Greensleeves," especially given that the performance is an *alternate* (and dubbed from a copy of a pressed 45, at that). But then, "Greensleeves" directs our attention to what this package is all about: the development of an artist and his band. In other words, and like other important boxed sets, the eight-CD *Complete Impulse! Studio Recordings* of the "classic" John Coltrane Quartet dispenses with the integrity of the original albums, laying out in chronological order the band's approach to standards and new material. It's amazing to hear how, even with most of this material reshuffled, songs still flow one to another, the pacing uncanny, as if an invisible hand was at work through it all.

In all, there are 66 pieces from 18 albums reaching almost 10 hours in length, with seven previously unreleased tracks, including alternates of "Crescent" and "Resolution" (from *A Love Supreme*). And while it is the "classic quartet" we hear, there are two exceptions in the persons of drummer Roy Haynes and bassist Art Davis. The 100-page booklet (bound in leather with an aluminum shell that,

like its distant, larger cousin the massive Bill Evans Verve box, could double as a weapon) includes an interview with Elvin Jones, a discography, track analysis and rare photos.

A sense of brooding does pervade a great deal of the *Complete Impulse! Studio Recordings*. And yet, so much of this man's spiritual/musical quest cannot be divorced from the mixed bag that came before. There is a very slight overlap with the preceding two-year Atlantic period, Coltrane's last recordings for that label ending just two days after his first (a large-ensemble date) for ABC-Paramount's new Impulse! label.

The beauty of "It's Easy To Remember" follows "Greensleeves" on disc one. The many ballads that pepper the early recordings



John Coltrane: cutting a swath a mile wide

would occasionally show Tyner's deeply lyrical side, but it was usually Coltrane "simply" blowing rhapsodic over lovely melodies with the pianist comping behind him. The popular *Ballads* album—splintered as it is here with Coltrane's blues "Up 'Gainst The Wall," the vastly revamped standard "Out Of This World," and the playful tunes "Big Nick" and "The Inchworm," among others—sounds right at home, on a continuum with the more exploratory material of 1962 reflected by "Out Of This World."

The relative calm of "Nancy (With The Laughing Face)," a cha-cha'd "All Or Nothing

At All" and "Too Young To Go Steady" soon gave way to a more incisive, penetrating group sound, one more rhythmically and emotionally complex. Socially thematic material like "Alabama," the heartfelt "Lonnie's Lament" and "The Drum Thing" workout found a logical successor in *A Love Supreme's* incantory brilliance, which, in turn, led to more "hints" of atonality and a mutable tempo (the second version of "Nature Boy" with second bassist Art Davis, from February '65). Jazz's more traditionally sophisticated harmonic frames of reference were not only being replaced by all those modal waltzes (e.g., "Chim Chim Cheree") and suites, but astral-oriented pieces with titles like "Sun Ship" and "Living Space" as well, pieces that continued to turn the idea of jazz improvisation on its head. "One of the set's most fascinating features is hearing this group, known for its irresistible swing and infectious song forms, stretch and push beyond the conventions they based their reputations on, and to hear Coltrane's soprano and tenor "sheets," "Giant Steps" and "Favorite Things," become fuel for the joyful beast that led so many to call his music "anti-jazz."

By the time of *Sun Ship* (August '65), original producer Bob Thiele was already co-producing with Coltrane, and the rearranged mix reflects this: Coltrane is now off the left channel (opposite Jones, a nice idea) and in the middle (where Tyner held forth). Thus, Tyner's piano, while a crucial element, rightly becomes localized. Throughout, Garrison and, especially, Jones remain steadfast in the mix, anchoring everything as one of the greatest jazz tandems ever.

Coltrane's sound and approach continued to evolve after the "classic quartet" disbanded in September 1965. Staying with Impulse!, he added new members and played and recorded with great fire until his death two years later. There are those who prefer his early period (recorded on Prestige), middle (Atlantic) or either of the later periods on Impulse! And there are those who love it all. It is to this last group that *The Classic Quartet—Complete Impulse! Studio Recordings* comes

most highly recommended. **DB**

Original Down Beat ratings:

- *Coltrane*: ★★★★★½ (10/11/62)
- *Ballads*: ★★ (3/28/63)
- *Impressions*: ★★★★★ (7/29/63)
- *Live At Birdland*: ★★★★★ (4/9/64)
- *Crescent*: ★★★★★½ (10/8/64)
- *A Love Supreme*: ★★★★★ (4/8/65)
- *The John Coltrane Quartet Plays*: ★★★★★½ (12/2/65)
- *Meditations*: ★★★★★/★ (reviewed twice) (12/1/66)
- *Transition*: ★★★★★½ (12/24/70)

# The House That Trane Built

by John Ephland

While John Coltrane was busy building the house that would become Impulse! Records during the 1960s, he had more than a few helping hands. Recent "New Thing" reissues address this immense house of talent.

**Elvin Jones/Jimmy Garrison Sextet: *Illumination!* (Impulse! 250; 31:18) ★★★★★** Here's the "classic" Coltrane quartet minus St. John. *Illumination!*, from 1963, includes sideman/pianist McCoy Tyner and a brilliant cast of baritonist Charles Davis, Sonny Simmons (on alto and english horn) and Prince Lasha (clarinet and flute) supporting drummer Jones and bassist Garrison in a too-short program of all originals, utilizing that trademark swing with imaginative arrangements and songwriting that's top-drawer. Davis is the principal soloist, but everyone gets a piece of the action.

**McCoy Tyner: *Reaching Fourth* (255; 34:20) ★★★★★** Drummer Roy Haynes can't seem to say enough as he (his left hand, to be exact) dogs pianist Tyner's every move on this 1962 recording date. Like *Illumination!*, *Reaching Fourth* (Tyner's second for Impulse!) is like ear candy for drummers, with the sound of percussion so close you swear you could touch it. Bassist Henry Grimes plays the straight man in a set of standards mixed with originals. Standouts include the energetic title track, a nice, easygoing Tyner blues and a definitive reading of "Have You Met Miss Jones," with knockout brushwork from our man Haynes.

**Pharoah Sanders: *Thembi* (253; 41:58) ★★★★★; *Jewels Of Thought* (247; 43:02) ★★★★★; *Summun, Bukmun, Umyun* (265; 39:07) ★★★★★** Three sets from reedist Sanders from the late '60s and early '70s indicate a change in the weather at Impulse! The calm that pervades *Thembi*'s "Astral Traveling" is silenced by his trademark wails on "Red, Black & Green." Sanders brings on extended aggregates for all three albums, with *Jewels Of Thought* and *Summun* made up of just two songs each. His combined use of various exotic percussion instruments, Lonnie Liston Smith's electric piano and that now-familiar two-chord vamp with a lilting samba feel (e.g., "Thembi") were timely then, and are still in vogue with the saxophonist. All three discs demonstrate Sanders' sway between cool, easy-listening, pre-Afro-pop melodicism and out-and-out free-jazz abandon, a split maintained to this day in live shows.

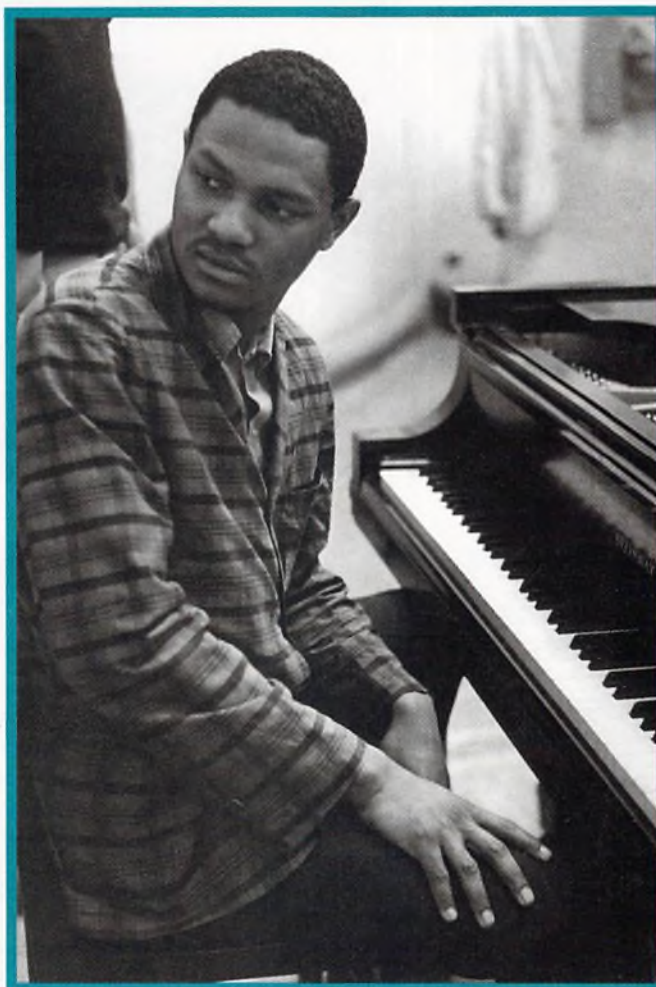
**Archie Shepp: *Mama Too Tight* (248; 38:23) ★★★★★; *Live In San Francisco* (254; 75:07) ★★★★★; *The Way Ahead* (272; 60:23) ★★★★★** *Mama Too Tight*, recorded in August 1966, features tenorist Shepp leading an octet in a truly balanced program of fire and delicacy. Mixed in with Shepp originals is a sidelong glance at Ellington ("Prelude To A Kiss") in an extended suite that successfully links it to much free blowing. Featuring bassist Charlie Haden, drummer Beaver Harris and trombonist Roswell Rudd, Shepp's wit, charm and slightly crazed personality come through. *Live In San Francisco*, recorded in February '66, sports a quintet with Harris, Rudd, and bassists Donald Garrett and Lewis Worrell. Herbie Nichols' "Lady Sings

beyond his own bands in the '60s, as this 1966 date attests. Alto saxophonist Brown performs with three of Shepp's bandmates in a split program with two bands of alternating pianists and drummers. Next to Brown, Moncur's trombone is the other primary voice. Together, their sound is light, penetrating and, many times, very lyrical. Three "for" Shepp by Brown are complemented by three by Shepp himself.

**Cecil Taylor/Roswell Rudd: *Mixed* (270; 70:18) ★★★★★** *Mixed* is a record-company creation, combining Taylor's contributions to Gil Evans' *Into The Hot* (1961) with Rudd's *Everywhere* (1966). There is stylistic continuity, but one wishes that there were more to the Taylor set, given that he's joined at times by Shepp, trumpeter Ted Curson, Rudd, drummer Sunny Murray and Taylor stalwart altoist Jimmy Lyons.

**Alice Coltrane: *A Monastic Trio* (267; 57:14) ★★★★★** Pianist Coltrane's sense of time, an elastic swing that never arrived at a defined pulse, combines with Tyneresque chords in this set of '67 and '68 recordings. The all-Alice program features Sanders on three cuts, bassist Jimmy Garrison and two drummers, Ben Riley and Rashied Ali on separate dates. An important document from the then-newly widowed wife of the sax titan.

**Albert Ayler: *Live In Greenwich Village: The Complete Impulse! Recordings* (2-273; 64:00/70:05) ★★★★★** These fiery performances clearly illustrate tenorist Ayler's dual nature as an eloquent stylist up against the rag-tag, rip-snorting improviser. An essential for most of this two-CD set is brother Donald on trumpet. More key sounds come through with, alternately, Michael Sampson on violin and cellist Joel Freedman. With pieces like the stately "Truth Is Marching In," the solemn "Our Prayer," the open-ended "For John Coltrane" and the marching "Omega Is The Alpha," what we hear is Ayler's combined crazyquilt recital of military, folk and free music. **DB**



McCoy Tyner: in the house of talent

"The Blues" gets a nice, swinging facelift, with Shepp in classic, ragged-edged form. Rudd's blaring, riveting trombone is the right counterweight to Shepp, whose bent melodicism keeps things off-balance with more Ellington pieces, "In A Sentimental Mood" and "Things Ain't What They Used To Be." Jump ahead two and three years (and two different bands) to *The Way Ahead* and we hear a Shepp who's maintained that sense of unease along with an ongoing link to the jazz tradition.

**Marion Brown: *Three For Shepp* (269; 34:47) ★★★★★** Shepp's influence went

Original Down Beat ratings:

- *Illumination!*: ★★½ (3/12/64)
- *Reaching Fourth*: ★★★★★½ (7/18/63)
- *Live In San Francisco*: ★★★★★½ (1/26/67)
- *The Way Ahead*: ★★★★★½ (3/20/69)
- *Three For Shepp*: ★★★★★ (8/22/68)
- *Everywhere*: ★★★★★ (3/9/67)
- *A Monastic Trio*: ★½ (2/6/69)
- *Albert Ayler In Greenwich Village*: ★★★★★ (7/11/68)

# BLINDFOLD TEST

MARCH 1999

## Al Di Meola

by Dan Ouellette

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

**R**elaxing backstage at Yoshi's in Oakland, Al Di Meola gears up for his first Down Beat Blindfold Test by lambasting the sorry state of radio. It's been difficult for his latest Telarc release, *The Infinite Desire*, to get airplay.

That aside, Di Meola has been defying categories since he first started playing the guitar at age 9. Inspired first by the Beatles, he later delved into the country zone before gravitating to a passionate appreciation of electric Miles Davis. After a spell at Berklee College of Music, Di Meola was enlisted by Chick Corea for his Return to Forever band. In subsequent years, he toured with Guitar Trio mates John McLaughlin and Paco DeLucia and formed the Al Di Meola Project, which has been the launching pad for his guitar pyrotechnics since the mid-'80s.

### John McLaughlin with the One Truth Band

"Guardian Angels"/"Miles Davis" (from *Electric Dreams*, Columbia/Legacy, rec'd 1978/1992) McLaughlin, guitars; L. Shankar, violins; Stu Goldberg, keyboards; Fernando Saunders, basses; Tony Smith, drums; Alyrio Lima, percussion.

It sounds like the McLaughlin piece "Guardian Angels." However, I don't think this is John because he'd be playing it 10 times faster. (After the pause between tracks) Now this could be John. It's more the tempo he likes. I'm waiting for John to start ripping with millions of notes. Yes, this is John all right. I'm not crazy about the guitar tone. It sounds scratchy. I'll give "Guardian Angels" 4 stars. The other piece I can only give 3 stars. There are a lot of elements in it that contributed to giving fusion a bad name. It doesn't really have a melody. There's also a lot of jamming and dissonance, which could be a good thing, but in this case there's no direction.

### Larry Coryell

"Something" (from *Come Together: Guitar Tribute To The Beatles*, NYC Records, 1993) Coryell, acoustic guitar.

This has a beautiful guitar tone. It sounds like an expanded tuning that gives the guitar a wider range harmonically. It's obviously a Beatles' song from *Abbey Road*. There's a relaxed feel. It could be someone like Larry Coryell. Yes, it's Larry. That's not an easy call because Larry is so identified with playing a plectrum. Larry is not only the godfather of fusion guitar, but he has a tremendous amount of guitar knowledge. He really inspired me when I was a kid. 5 stars.

### Bill Frisell

"Blues For Los Angeles" (from *Gone, Just Like A Train*, Nonesuch, 1998) Frisell, guitar; Viktor Krauss, bass; Jim Keltner, drums.

I love the mood right off. This is Bill Frisell. It's that quirky, crazy, very witty guitar style. It's like Bill Gates meets the Addams Family. Frisell has an original approach. I'm in agreement with almost every single jazz critic when I give this 5 stars. But based on appealing to the public, I'd give this 2½ stars. It's too wacky. It's for critics and guys who understand what he's doing. Bill is a critics' darling because they like musicians, people like Ornette Coleman, that the public normally doesn't go for.



STUART BRONKHORST

### Kenny Burrell & John Coltrane

"Why Was I Born" (from *Kenny Burrell & John Coltrane*, NewJazz/OJC, rec'd 1958/1987) Burrell, guitar; Coltrane, tenor sax.

My first impression is maybe Jim Hall and Paul Desmond, but there's a little more treble in the tone than Jim. It's a record I don't have, but one that I'd like to get. It's intimacy at its best in a duet performed by what sounds like two major jazz players. The more I listen to it, this could be Kenny Burrell. It is? There you go. So, then it's Coltrane. I should have known that. This is a record I have, and it's an awfully beautiful ballad. I rate it 5.

### Choying Dolma & Steve Tibbetts

"Tal" (from *Cho*, Rykodisc, 1997) Tibbetts, guitar.

This sounds conceptually like that guy up in Minneapolis, Steve Tibbetts. I love what he does. He gives a lot of thought to production. I love the backward tapes, the in-your-face sound and the dissonant ambience with what could be a 12-string, but sounds almost banjo-ish. This piece has a very cinematic avant-garde sound. He sounds like the type of guy who lives in a log cabin way out in Minnesota and never comes out. He's the Unaguitarist. I give this a 5. I'd love to meet him.

### Lee Ritenour

"This Is Love" (from *This Is Love*, i.e., 1998) Ritenour, guitar, bass, synthesizer, drum programming; Larry Williams, saxophone; Jerry Hey, Gary Grant, trumpets; Bill Reichenbach, trombone.

It sounds like Lee Ritenour, Mark Whitfield or Larry Carlton. I'm listening on only to see what this guy's soloing capabilities are. The recording itself is nice, obviously geared for commercial radio. But I don't hear much in the way of soloing, so it can't be one of the major players. If it is, he's tremendously restrained because there's plenty of room to blow here. God hopes that whoever this is, he hasn't fallen in the trap of trying to appeal to the decline of jazz radio, that smooth jazz crap. This gets a 2. It's just way too conservative. This is the sick period we live in when it comes to radio. **DB**