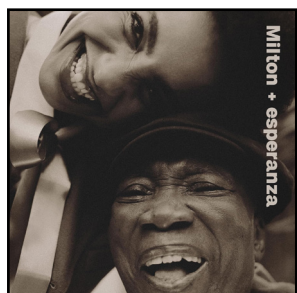


tune pause for a string glissandi and drum swells duet. The percussionist's strategy isn't all yelping ruffs, metal reverberations and cogwheel-like rotations, however. During the introductory "Bascule" and the concluding "Cantilever", he marshals drum crunches and cymbal rasps to galvanize a percussive groove thick enough for the pianist to ride on top of, showcasing gentle reverb and story-telling ripples.

Resourceful and rambunctious in equal measures, these two albums show how Agnel comports herself facing adroit challenges. Perhaps a future animated trio session with Zerang and Butcher would be even more memorable.

For more info visit victo.qc.ca and relativepitchrecords.com



Milton + esperanza
Milton Nascimento/esperanza spalding
(Concord)
by Andrew Schinder

Vocalist-bassist esperanza spalding's ascent into jazz superstardom over the past two decades has been marked by her continued adherence to a forward-thinking philosophy: no two records of hers are alike. Spalding's collaborations may range from Wayne Shorter to hip-hop legend Q-Tip, yet she has consistently cited Brazilian vocal legend Milton Nascimento as a key influence.

The two musical giants have released a full-bodied collaboration in *Milton + esperanza*, recorded in 2023 following the then 81-year-old Nascimento's farewell concert tour, and it is enormously successful (recently GRAMMY-nominated for "Best Jazz Vocal Album"). The hypnotizing chemistry between the two permeates the 16 tracks from a record that feels lived-in, welcoming, even intimate. A blend of renditions of classic Nascimento songs, spalding originals and pop and jazz covers, the album showcases the two singers fairly equally, their frequent duets providing the recording's most enchanting delights. Spalding successfully navigates the Brazilian Portuguese language in her interpretations of such Nascimento classics as "Cais", "Outubro" and "Tudo O Que Voce Podia Ser", with Nascimento serving as elder statesman, a guide through the Tropicália traditions that he helped popularize over his long and storied career.

Those who think the world could do without more covers of The Beatles would be well-served to bask in spalding and Nascimento's rendition of "A Day in the Life". The version starts out simply enough, yet spalding's stunning falsettos are a particular highlight. The cover turns appropriately whimsical and fanciful, however, even allowing pianist Leo Genovese the opportunity for an abbreviated psychedelic freak-out. Vocal icon, Dianne Reeves, appears on a cover of Michael Jackson's "Earth Song", the subject matter of which is sadly as timely now as it was when the original was released in 1995. spalding and Reeves bring power and anger to the rendition, while Nascimento's vocals are weathered and weary, expressing sadness rather than fury, a resignation following 81 years of life. Paul Simon's appearance on "Um Vento Passou (para Paul Simon)" is surprisingly seamless, no small feat given the danger that Simon would serve as a distraction, but his vocals are subtle and sweet, grounded by

Nascimento providing an anchor to the duet. A cover of the Shorter classic "When You Dream" (featuring the saxophonist's widow Carolina) is a tour-de-force, spalding's vocals displaying a powerful, forceful range, building to an extended crescendo backed by Genovese's forceful accompaniment.

For more info visit concord.com. Spalding is at Blue Note thru Mar. 2. See Calendar.



Painting the Town
Eric Comstock & Barbara Fasano
(Human Child)
by Marilyn Lester

Married couple, pianist-vocalist Eric Comstock and vocalist Barbara Fasano, make beautiful music together, figuratively and on musical stages near and far. They've long-enjoyed various residencies at Birdland, with their long-time bassist, Sean Smith, who appears (along with drummer Vito Lesczak) with the duo on this new release, *Painting the Town*. The album marks Comstock and Fasano's first ever together and celebrates their two-decade union.

A major domain of the pair is the classic Great American Songbook—and those familiar tunes are present—but in the generous 15 tracks there are also welcome outliers and hidden gems that the two regularly salt into their live sets. "Will You Love Me Tomorrow?/I Want to Talk About You" (Carole King, Gerry Goffin/Billy Eckstine) is a creative Comstock feature, delivered as an easy pair of story songs, with an instrumental interlude by guest artist Houston Person; his bluesy tenor saxophone adds plenty of soul to this number and the six tracks total on which he appears: on each, his depth of playing adds another layer of emotional intensity and seasoned sophistication.

Joni Mitchell's intense story-song "Marcie" is a well-chosen folk-jazz vehicle for Fasano's light but depthful soprano. Comstock has long been an Ellington aficionado, and the choice of the ballad "Brown Penny" (from the Broadway experiment *Beggars Holiday*, lyric by John Latouche) is a welcome inclusion, with Person, again, smooth as glass, and Fasano especially evocative. For those who think they know Ellington, this one's an eye-opener and the creative button that Person plays to end the tune is sheer genius. Likewise, Billy Strayhorn's little-known, little-played "Still in Love", the album closer, is a duet in swing mode, with Person and Smith creating smart toe-tapping riffs. This is a selection that's not only plenty of fun, but it makes a great declaration of the couple's strength of feeling for each other. Another swing tune is the groover, "The Hamptons" (Jim Lowe), a wry commentary on the glitzy Long Island summer hangout for the upmarket New York City set. The sendup is perfectly executed by the pair, with the bassist and saxophonist underscoring the satire. A creatively-arranged "Blue Skies", that happy Irving Berlin tune in its haunting minor key, is a particular winner.

Painting the Town is a testament to great tunes, impeccable musicality and vocal prowess.

For more info visit barbarafasano.com and ericcomstock.net. The album release concert is at Birdland Mar. 2. See Calendar.

DROP THE NEEDLE



Cold Drinks, Hot Dreams
Atrás del Cosmos
(Blank Forms Editions)
by Marc Medwin

By 1975, when Mexico's first free jazz ensemble, Atrás del Cosmos, was founded, the genre's boundaries had been well-delineated. This historical fact makes the present, first-time reissue of *Cold Drinks, Hot Dreams* all the more important. Ana Ruiz (piano) with Henry West (saxophones), Claudio Enriquez (bass) and Evry Mann (percussion) worked within and against those boundaries to document incendiary improvisation amidst a timbral mélange whose implications render their name entirely appropriate.

The digital and vinyl reissue comprises the group's sole recording, and from the "Cold Drinks" opening pianistic salvos, no holds are barred. Two sustained chords anticipate the various non-linearities to come: Ruiz immediately ups the ante with deftly articulated percussives and arpeggios in counterpoint before resettling into lower-register, open-voiced sonorities. Her delicacy of phrasing balances volcanic power in abundance as Thelonious Monk, Bill Evans and Cecil Taylor narrate the molten undercurrents of her own unique voice. West and Mann's entrances (2:46 and 3:27, respectively) initiate the sinewy juxtaposition of melody, harmony and their antipodes that the best aggregates can muster as each structure sounds and is ignited. Mann's melodic percussion and the ensuing multivalent drone usher the music toward stunned silence. This epic alone would ensure the group plaudits, but Mann's "Clapping Hands II", a masterfully meditative balafon solo of intersecting arc and plane, reopens the question of exactly what and whose freedom is being narrated.

The stage is set. "Clapping" finds its complement later in the program in full-band ostinato, a powerhouse immediately preceded by Ornette Coleman's gorgeous and still underappreciated "What Reason", the melody achingly rendered by West. The album title's second half is also represented by another blistering aggregate improv, this time with a crystalline middle section of Mann's cymbals supporting bassist Enriquez' modal melodies. With what sounds like tabla and piano, the traditional "Hanne IV" graces the album's second side with its slow-burning mode and deliberate tread. Perhaps best of all is a simmering distillation, caught in concert, of Dave Liebman's "M.D." where Ruiz' melodies and harmonies merge to guide the piece forward on its concentric waves. Indeed, in its winning diversity, her playing unifies the myriad sound worlds Atrás del Cosmos creates.

Never has a reissue been more timely and better deserved!

For more info visit blankforms.org/blank-forms-editions