



Ashes to Gold
Avishai Cohen (ECM)
by Jeff Cebulski

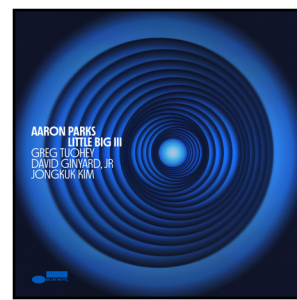
The trumpeter and bandleader Avishai Cohen was challenged in every creative way by the tragic events in Israel that began on October 7, 2023: “I could not write anything. I couldn’t touch the trumpet.” Convinced by his pianist Yonathan Avishai that they needed to play music, Cohen, newly motivated, composed the bulk of his suite *Ashes to Gold* in a week’s time, adding sections to it during a subsequent tour. What emerged was a composition unlike what Cohen and his quartet—Avishai (piano), Barak Mori (bass) and Ziv Ravitz (drums)—have done before, in that the music is tightly produced and rehearsed with little to no room for improvisation. The title references the Japanese *kintsugi* ceramic repair art, which recreates a broken item from its fragments, using gold to attach them. In this case, Cohen is the one fragmented and music is the gold.

The five-part suite has the elegiac tone of Cohen’s *Into the Silence* (ECM, 2015) but with an implied dramatic intensity that makes the two added tracks (a Ravel work and a piece written by Cohen’s daughter Amalia) a refreshment, part of the “gold” Cohen was aiming for. The dramatic element is most intense in Part I, with

Cohen playing flute in creating a pastoral atmosphere that would be ripped apart by violence. Avishai’s chiming piano passage (almost like funeral peals) leads to the drummer’s pounding interruption of the peace. Mori bows a portentous line, while Ravitz’ drums serve as a military cadence, as Cohen (back on trumpet) tells the anguished story. Eventually, he returns on flute, but with a droll and poignant bowed bass and that piano chime. Parts 2 through 5 represent the leader’s attempt to find meaning after the onslaught. The mood never approaches anger but contemplates loss. His trumpet wails and wonders while lingering battles, represented by Ravitz’ background throbbing and thumping remain. The bassist plays a dignified elegy in front of Cohen’s most lyrical statement, honoring the lost. A chamber interlude precedes Avishai’s flowing piano intro to the final portion, suggesting that life goes on. Cohen plays an echoed passage that proclaims rather than laments, while Ravitz pulses, emphasizing movement over passivity.

At the end, Cohen’s *Ashes to Gold* rises above the fray, and, with Ravel’s *Adagio assai* and Cohen’s daughter’s lovely “The Seventh” added, proposes that the dignity of music and a new generation can lift a moribund situation into a purposeful future while holding close a profound memory.

For more info visit ecmrecords.com. The album release concert is at National Sawdust Mar. 29. Avishai Cohen is also at Appel Room Mar. 14-15 (with Anat Cohen). See Calendar.



Little Big III
Aaron Parks (Blue Note)
by Brian Charette

Pianist Aaron Parks’ third release for Blue Note, the raw, futuristic *Little Big III* features the stellar Greg Tuohey (guitar), David Ginyard, Jr. (bass) and Jongkuk Kim (drums), who together create sounds that are relaxed within minimal and spare, spacious playing.

“Flyways”, which offers a lonely Lydian Melody, features Kim’s hypnotic beat that is held together by the leader’s rhythmic chords, while Tuohey’s guitar delay adds to the dream-like atmosphere. Bassist Ginyard never leaves the pocket and provides a groove with an occasional well-placed slide or fill. Parks, who stretches in bursts, trades brilliant lines with the guitarist as synth sounds float atop to add another layer. The quartet team works the throttle perfectly without ever losing control. On the intro to “Locked Down”, the drummer’s snare is tuned down and compressed for the dark indie beat, while Parks’ low bass piano notes support Tuohey’s floaty guitar as Kim’s ride cymbal gives a breath of optimism to the swirling dense chords. The leader has a magical lyrical sense and his improvisations always contain twisty edges and engaging resolutions, while the guitarist has a keen talent for comping as he utilizes controlled washes that rush in, then recede and fade.

The off-beat piano of “Little Beginnings” gets a shake from the triplet feel of Ginyard and Kim, the latter offers some impressive percussive sounds and original beats. The synth solo is punchy but passes in a flash leaving the listener wanting more, as Tuohey takes the lead with a bluesy tone, while Parks’ subtle modulation wheel shifts add expression. The guitarist opens “The Machines” and cues the entrance of the drummer’s intricate and effects-manipulated break beat. A

memorable country tune with fluid third scale degree starts “Delusion”, showcasing Ginyard’s rock-solid bass line. At the breakdown, the sounds of tambourine and distorted guitar frame descending classical motives from the leader, heightening the witchery of the tune. A two-string guitar bend heightens the tension before the recapitulation of the haunting melody and a low piano stinger at the end. The beautiful ballad “Ashé” has gentle Floyd Cramer-like turns and guitar/voice melody that sets a great mood to close out the album. Parks then takes his time with a melancholic solo egged on by Kim’s soulful stirrings on brushes.

Aaron Parks and his enigmatic group are changing the sound of small group jazz, and your album collection should be begging for what might just be considered a trailblazing record.

For more info visit bluenote.com. Parks is at Village Vanguard Mar. 18-23. See Calendar.



Lumination
Joel Frahm Trio (Anzic)
by Tom Greenland

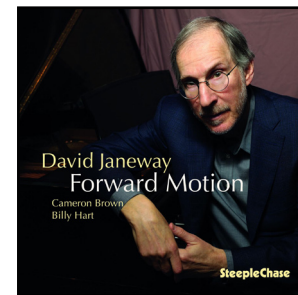
Lumination, Joel Frahm Trio’s sophomore release on Anzic, is a worthy successor to the group’s *The Bright Side* (2021), each chordless tenor saxophone trio recordings, with Dan Loomis (bass) and Ernesto Cervini (drums); both albums also highlight the quietly charismatic collective chemistry of its participants. Neither blowing date nor artistic manifesto, *Lumination* is more like a peek into the long-term (going on ten years) working relationship of this team. Each member contributes to the writing—seven tunes by Frahm, two by Cervini, one by Loomis—and they enjoy considerable freedom in the spare format, where group discussions frequently break into dialogues and no one needs to raise his voice to be heard.

Frahm is a superb player, possessed of tremendous creativity, range and thematic continuity—someone who, for all his ability, never succumbs to virtuosic display, exaggeration or melodrama—making even his most ear-opening statements with a certain degree of relaxed reserve. Obviously influenced by the muscular swagger of bebop, he yet retains an element of Midwestern cool. Loomis is similarly melodic, working cohesive motifs into his solos and counterpoint into his accompaniment, employing a distinctive technique to attack his notes, as if his hands are bouncing off the strings, sounding something like the “gun” and “dmm” bass strokes of a conga drummer. Cervini, when he’s not adding bricks to shore up the musical masonry, is troweling mortar into its cracks: connecting, filling, solidifying.

Album tracks run short, emphasizing song form rather than extended solos. Cervini’s “The Nurse Is In” (reminiscent of Sonny Rollins’ “Pent-Up House”), Cervini’s “Loo Lee” and Frahm’s quirky but catchy “Loomie Nation” and “Catch 22” are all well penned, post-bop themes. “Disco Nern 1” and “False Spring” dig deep grooves; others vary: “Kern You Dig It?” (a contrafact of Jerome Kern’s “All the Things You Are”) swings easily; “Na Estrada” floats moodily; “Lament” dirges along ominously. “Vesper Flights” alludes to, but doesn’t give over to, the ecstatic impulses of John Coltrane’s mid-period modal waltz workouts. Frahm’s improvisations, consistently excellent, are especially compelling on the gorgeous “Moonface

Lament”, during the tenor/drum trading at the end of “Kern” and on “Flights” and “Catch 22”. The trio as a team shines brightest on “Loomie Nation”, where individual contributions become seamlessly integrated, where time slows, opens and expands. In keeping with the etymology of its title, this album seeks for something rarer than mere illumination (i.e., “showing, lighting”)—it seeks lumination: a moment or more of inspiration and enlightenment.

For more info visit anzicrecords.com. The album release concert is at Smalls Mar. 7-8. See Calendar.



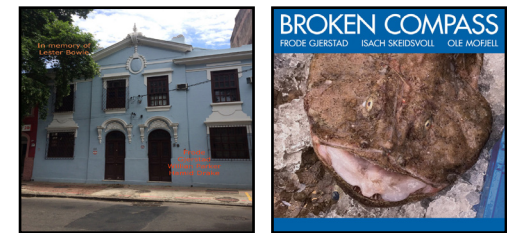
Forward Motion
David Janeway (SteepleChase)
by Ken Dryden

Like veteran pianist (Dr.) Denny Zeitlin, David Janeway found time during his career as a psychiatrist to record and play gigs, though on a more limited basis than Zeitlin. Since Janeway retired from his psychiatric practice in 2019, he’s been a lot more musically active, though like most he was promptly hampered by the COVID-19 pandemic. But even the lockdown didn’t keep the pianist from forming a first-rate trio with Cameron Brown (bass) and Billy Hart (drums), as heard here on his new album.

Forward Motion, the group’s second recording together, continues to demonstrate that Janeway could always have had a full-time career in jazz, had he chosen to do so. This session offers a strong mix of jazz tunes, including both well-known and hidden gems, along with potent originals by the leader. The pianist’s joyful setting of Cedar Walton’s “Martha’s Prize” reminds us of the power and lyricism of the late pianist, a piece he premiered in the mid ’90s that is just starting to gain traction among musicians. Thelonious Monk’s “Two Timer” is rather obscure, since its composer never recorded it, and if he had, it surely would have been very different from Janeway’s breezy interpretation here.

Brown’s inventive bass playing is prominently featured in the first half, with the leader’s post-bop chops to follow. Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn’s lush ballad “The Star-Crossed Lovers” is given a rhapsodic setting by Janeway, with the nimble percussion of Hart, as well as Brown’s spacious bass line, fueling the pianist’s shimmering improvisation. Cole Porter’s “Night and Day” has been a go-to standard for decades and the up-tempo piano romp through it with a bossa nova undercurrent would get any audience on its feet and dancing. Janeway’s “Fully Vaxxed” conveys the turmoil that people felt as to whether or not they were safe from COVID-19 during the pandemic; the strong interplay between the three musicians is intense and pardon the pun, infectious. His lyrical “Bright Waltz” has a mysterious, exotic air, blending a lush theme with a sense of foreboding. Another original by the leader, “Woodward Avenue”, conveys the imagery of a busy city street on a weekday. And to close this rewarding session, Janeway’s setting of Monk’s “Bemsha Swing” displays the marvelous interplay of the trio as they break new ground exploring this jazz standard.

For more info visit steeplechase.dk. Janeway is at Smalls as leader Mar. 28-29 and as sideman Mar. 21-22 (with Eliot Zigmond). He is also at Jazz Forum Mar. 28-29. See Calendar and 100 Miles Out.



In Memory of Lester Bowie
Frode Gjerstad, William Parker, Hamid Drake
(Circulacione Totale)
Broken Compass
Broken Compass (Frode Gjerstad, Isach Skeidsvoll,
Ole Mofjell) (Circulacione Totale)
by Elliott Simon

These pair of releases from Norwegian saxophonist, Frode Gjerstad (who turns 77 this month), show off his adventurous horn in two very different trios. *In Memory of Lester Bowie* is a live gig from 2000 with William Parker (bass) and Hamid Drake (drums), while *Broken Compass* presents a new trio with Isach Skeidsvoll (piano) and Ole Mofjell (drums). When taken together they embody the evolution of a premiere spokesman for free jazz in Norway but also two major aspects of his long and prolific career.

In the ’80s, Gjerstad was part of Detail, a trio with South African bassist Johnny Dyani and British drummer John Stevens that immersed the saxophonist in avant garde jazz improvisation. Their 1983 debut album (*Backwards and Forwards*, Impetus) illuminated Gjerstad’s dynamic interplay with an exceptional rhythm section. While one can draw comparisons between Detail and his Drake/Parker band, striking differences do exist. On *In Memory of Lester Bowie*, the three are equals who together extensively toured in the late ’90s. This live session, recorded in Chicago upon learning of Bowie’s passing, captures the trio at their peak. The musicians exhibit a seamless rapport, devoid of egos, allowing each to inhabit musical space comfortably. Even without a trumpeter present, the honoree’s spirit still permeates the four compositions titled “For Lester 1-4”, that elegantly use silence, quick attacks and dynamics to achieve depth and subtlety. Whether it’s Drake or Parker initiating rhythms that organically evolve into cohesive wholes, Gjerstad explores them with his entire range on saxophone. His array of sounds—squeaks, squonks, cries and wails—always retain a semblance of melody. During the nominal leader’s breaks, both Drake and Parker reveal their exotic melodicism and spirituality.

Broken Compass delves into an encounter with a captured monkfish whose sister, mother and gender all come into question. Introducing a “homegrown” Norwegian trio, it initially evokes Gjerstad’s collaboration with bassist Øyvind Storesund and drummer Paal Nilssen-Love. However, the resemblance ends there, as Gjerstad and pianist Skeidsvoll share a remarkable synergy. The duo previously collaborated on *Twenty Fingers* (Relative Pitch, 2021) that showcased their combination of lyricism and improvisational prowess. Drummer Mofjell also skillfully engages with Skeidsvoll, as on “Is the fish a he or a she?”, crafting intricate and melodious rhythms for the saxophonist to improvise over or harmonize with. Does the monkfish embody Thelonious Monk’s essence through the session’s employment of dissonance, unconventional harmonies and elements of suspense and surprise? “Why is it looking at me?” is tenderly questioning; “Who is his mother” features a switch to clarinet for a demure piece filled with trials and tribulations. Throughout, the band strikes a unique balance of independence and structure, utilizing the tools of free jazz while incorporating catchy hooks and riffs. As free as this music is, it maintains a sense of cohesion, offering a welcoming and safe listening environment.

For more info visit frodegjerstad.bandcamp.com

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