



Apple Cores
James Brandon Lewis Trio (ANTI-Records)
by Jeff Cebulski

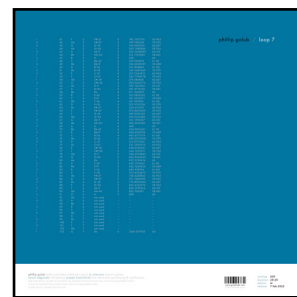
While the album title, *Apple Cores*, refers to the *Village Voice* column by the late Amiri Baraka, the spirit of saxophonist James Brandon Lewis' new release comes from another "late great": pocket trumpet hero and cultural inquirer Don Cherry. The album doesn't reinterpret Cherry's work, but rather represents Lewis' desire to expand on the trumpeter's indefatigable drive to integrate various world music genres and rhythms into his music. More particularly, Lewis was captured by Cherry's "risk-taking" (his term) on the album *Home Boy (Sister Out)* (Barclay, 1985), where Cherry dives into African-tinged hip hop grooves and vocals. Lewis eventually began his self-described "conversation" with Cherry on his *Days of FreeMan* (OKeh, 2015) and *Apple Cores* is his extension of that project.

The tenor saxophonist and his longstanding trio—Josh Warner (bass, guitar) and Chad Taylor (drums, mbira)—respond with ten improvised selections (each under five minutes) that traverse a collection of urban rhythms, including three different versions of the title cut. With one exception, the material is driven by the

rhythm section's deeply-resonating grooves upon which Lewis displays his formidable talent, often taking off into his own interstellar space. This is best manifested on "Don't Forget Jayne", a high-powered excursion that receives the totality of the trio's energy, including Taylor's dense pounding, Warner's ponderous bass and guest Guilherme Monteiro's airy guitar, while Lewis dances and wails. The single "Prince Eugene" promenades down an Afro-Caribbean path, with Warner's reggae-ish bass line and Taylor's combination of drums and Zimbabwean mbira providing a pleasant beat as Lewis croons. "Five Spots to Caravan" (a tribute to Cherry's journey from NYC to Fort Worth with Ornette Coleman) pairs hip-hoppy beats with the leader's version of Coleman's off-center style, mixed with the tonal depth of another Texan, tenor saxophonist Booker Ervin. "Remember Brooklyn & Moki"—a soulful remembrance of Cherry's life with his artistic wife, Moki—rides Warner's jaunty electric bass lead and guitar washes. Album closer, "Exactly Our Music", has an African rhythmic lilt but with echoed chamber effects, perhaps channeling some Cherry productions.

Every James Brandon Lewis album is unique. Capable of walking into a studio with a singular vision and then encapsulating it, he has a gift for making each recording a unified, consummate experience. *Apple Cores*, both in intention and performance, continues in that exquisite trend.

For more info visit anti.com. Lewis is at Public Records Mar. 6. See Calendar.



Loop 7
Phillip Golub (Greyfade)
by Marc Medwin

There is something disarmingly beautiful about recurrence, especially when executed with this direct complexity. Composer and pianist Phillip Golub is in a remarkable position to bridge the supposed gulf separating spontaneity and repetition, which he and a wonderful ensemble here do with cool finesse.

It behooves anyone interested to listen to a very informative online interview with Golub in which he describes learning to compose with each new piece. Comparing *Loop 7*, his second Greyfade album, with *Filters*, his first, speaks to that re- and deconstruction. The methodologies behind his latest release are too complex to rehearse here, but where the earlier effort involved solo piano, we now hear two pianos in microtonal layers augmented by an absolutely astonishing take on ensemble interaction, including Ty Citerman (guitar), Aaron Edgcomb (vibraphone) and Greyfade frontman Joseph Branciforte (electronics, synthesizer). Subtlety doesn't even begin to describe the layered piano's melding of harmony and melody as it traverses what might best be called asymmetric repetitions that descend over the piece's 28-minute trajectory.

As the music unfolds, minuscule reminiscences of a "jazz" riff (as at 2:07 and many other points) float toward consciousness only to recede with equal ambiguity. The ensemble, sparse at first, gathers what might be described as density and momentum, though all ultimately remains tranquil. It is as if the ensemble blooms from the piano, erecting edifices naturally from the loops' hewn granite. Bowed vibraphone, ghostly

bass tones and the occasional bit of guitar counterpoint are liberally peppered with electronic antecedents and consequents as the descent continues. The ensemble is both chorus and actor, commenting, supporting and delicately encroaching on the ever-unstable but ironically rock-solid form Golub has created.

A good recording is par for the course these days, which is as it should be, but this one is exemplary. Each sound and sonority inhabits its own space while perspective is miraculously maintained. Like those pioneering Conlon Nancarrow discs *Other Minds* has reissued, the acoustic is dry, which is just as well given the music's reliance on exquisitely gentle articulation. All involved should take pride in this, one of Golub and Greyfade's finest releases.

For more info visit greyfade.com. Golub is at The Jazz Gallery Mar. 13 and *SEEDS Brooklyn* Mar. 20. See Calendar.



Anchors
Jason Stein (TAO Forms)
by Mike Shanley

The history of jazz is filled with stories of musicians dealing with various ailments. Many were self-induced, but a lifestyle of playing clubs and traveling extensively can take a physical toll on anyone. So, too, can mastering an instrument. And although the liner notes to *Anchors* don't specifically mention his condition, bass clarinetist Jason Stein suffered from a physical ailment that had an impact on his playing. Having studied with percussionist Milford Graves, who saw a deep connection between music and good health, Stein worked to heal himself. Cold-water plunges and breathwork were part of the process, along with myofascial trigger point therapy, which helped him locate the source of an injury.

The music on *Anchors* is inspired by Stein's healing journey, with titles including "Cold Water", "Holding Breath" and "Crystalline", coming from different aspects of the process. Appearing throughout the album are Joshua Abrams (bass) and Gerald Cleaver (drums), while Boon (a one-named multidisciplinary artist and songwriter from Chicago, who produced *Anchors*) wrote the liner notes and plays acoustic guitar on the opening and closing title tracks. "Anchors I" and "Anchors II" are gentle meditations with the bass clarinetist echoing the guitarist's sparse, single-note lines on the first and playing in unison on the latter. "Holding Breath" finds the trio building from free, understated movement into a steady groove, allowing the leader to stretch out. For the first three and half minutes of "An Origin", he intones a single low note as bass and drums flex beneath him. When this beginning shapes into more of a structure, Stein solos in a Thelonious Monk-like manner, shaping and reshaping simple phrases repeatedly. The album additionally incorporates wild blowing, along with its more subdued moments. "Cold Water" evokes a watery plunge, with a conclusion that grasps the healing power that can be found in it. "Boon" comes off like a free ballad, while "Crystalline" is driven by Abrams' arco work and Cleaver's cymbal rolls, tempting Stein to dabble a bit in his horn's altissimo register.

Like any good concept album, the ideas behind the music bring greater understanding to the

program. Yet, the performances stand on their own, even without any detailed notes on hand. It might necessitate a close listen to appreciate the trio's (and duo's) work, but that's always a crucial element with this music.

For more info visit aumfidelity.com/collections/tao-forms. Stein is at The Kitchen Feb. 28-Mar. 1 (with Joshua Abrams' Natural Information Society). See Calendar.



Old Main Chapel
Ron Miles (Blue Note)
by Tom Greenland

Cornetist Ron Miles' death, three years ago this month, from a rare blood cancer was a loss to the jazz community, but his gently transcendental music endures with Blue Note's recently released *Old Main Chapel*, a recording of his September 2011 concert with guitarist Bill Frisell and drummer Brian Blade in Boulder, CO. Like his work in other contexts, there is a seemingly paradoxical combination of relaxation and resolve in Miles' delivery, a calm confidence that speaks powerfully in lowered tones. Frisell and Blade are fitting companions, equally assertive, equally restrained, well acquainted with Miles' ways. The result is the musical equivalent of the 1981 film, *My Dinner with Andre*: an extended conversation among old friends touching on topics ranging from spirituality to the comedy of human errors.

Opening the set is the elegiac "Mr. Kevin". Here and throughout the performance, Miles' cornet speaks in a slightly hoarse tone, occasionally choking on a note or hiccupping, prone to slight lip slips and buzzes—a signal that, for him, clarity of emotion takes precedence over technical perfection—though he is quite capable of producing tones of immaculate resplendence when so moved. Frisell is in his element, adding bass parts, moving counter-lines and chord fragments that never stray far from Miles' melodies, nor overstate an idea that can be outlined with fewer notes. Blade's drum parts are panned to different locations in the mix, creating the illusion of multiple drummers. His chuckles, grunts and other delighted vocalizations, caught by close mic'ing, form a running commentary on the small surprises that occur all during the performance. A cover of Fred Fisher's "There Ain't No Sweet Man That's Worth the Salt of My Tears" (all other tunes are by the leader) flows forward in a slow, bluesy dirge; "Guest of Honor" marches in old-timey fashion to Blade's lightly brushed snare; "Queen Bee" cautiously explores outer boundaries, ultimately reaching new territory. Most tracks unfold gracefully, unhurriedly, stretching to ten minutes or more. "Ruby-Go-Round", slightly shorter, contains some of the most exciting interchanges, with audible cheering from Miles and Blade. "I Will Be Free" is reverential, like a hymn, sparsely stated, deeply felt.

"New Medium", the closer, moves from an empathetic guitar-drum dialogue to a cornet-drum duet, Miles' sparse, tuneful gestures answered by Blade's congenial responses, to end with a beautifully doubled melody over constantly climbing harmonies, an artful example, like the rest of the date, of how less can be so much more.

For more info visit bluenote.com

BOXED SET



Giant Beauty
أحمد [Ahmed] (Fönstret)
by Stuart Broomer

If jazz history has many shapes, one of its essential characteristics is its ability to develop in mercurial ways, to breed music that can, at once, resonate with the past, galvanize the present and suggest paths forward. The band أحمد [Ahmed] is such a phenomenon, an ongoing quartet that first performed and recorded in 2016, and which has maintained a consistent and distinct personnel, program and form ever since. Conventional enough in its instrumentation, it combines Englishmen Seymour Wright (alto) and Pat Thomas (piano), Swede Joel Grip (bass) and Frenchman Antonin Gerbal (drums). They may not yet be familiar names in American jazz circles, but current European improvised music is enriched in myriad ways by their presence, with webs of associations that include central figures such as Evan Parker, John Butcher, Phil Minton and AMM. Particularly keen attachments to jazz tradition can arise too, in individual resumes, whether it's Gerbal performing in a definitive treatment of Mary Lou Williams' orchestral music, Thomas playfully exploring the Ellington songbook or Wright referencing saxophonists from Johnny Hodges to Tina Brooks and writing incisive essays on Horace Silver. Further, the on-screen presence of Grip and Gerbal in the film *The Brutalist*, and Wright's presence on the soundtrack, might well expand their base.

The band's name is symbolic in its insistence, beginning with the Arabic spelling of Ahmed, followed by its Anglicized form in brackets. It's keyed, in part, to their compositional underpinnings. أحمد [Ahmed] is a kind of repertory company, devoted to realizations of the compositions of Ahmed-Abdul Malik (1927-1993), the composer, bassist and oud player who, in the late '50s and early '60s, played with Thelonious Monk, among others, and who released a singular series of albums under his own name—*Jazz Sahara*, *East Meets West*, *The Music of Ahmed Abdul-Malik* and *The Eastern Moods of Ahmed Abdul-Malik*—that merged modern jazz practice with the traditional modes, rhythms and melodies of the Middle East and East Africa. Among his associates were several outstanding jazz musicians, including Lee Morgan, Johnny Griffin, Calo Scott and Andrew Cyrille.

While Malik's own music is again available, there's one credit that places him closer to the center of jazz history rather than an exotic periphery. Malik appears on John Coltrane's marathon *The Complete 1961 Village Vanguard Recordings*, playing tamboura (an Indian string drone instrument) on some versions of Coltrane's "India", a radical recasting of the blues "Mr. Knight" with wailing, pitch-bending soprano saxophone, bass clarinet, English horn and bowed and plucked basses. It suggests a longer and deeper lineage for jazz, the result of a music spreading over 100 years from the Middle East, eastward to India and westward, across North Africa, to Spain and thence to the Americas, a music that was modal,

polyrhythmic and improvisatory that in Coltrane is not just "the new thing" but a profound resurgence, one prefigured by Malik's own music. Those are powerful roots and أحمد [Ahmed] has developed a singular practice since their first public performance, devoted to "El Haris (Anxious)". It took place in a rural Swedish barn for Joel Grip's 2016 Hagen-fest and was released a year later as the LP *New Jazz Imagination* on Umlaut. It's a pattern that the group has followed with each successive performance and record release, each running from around 40 minutes to an hour. *Super Majnoon (East Meets West)*, released in 2019, differs in being two pieces on a double-LP set; *Wood Blues* (2024) further differs in being spread over two 45-rpm records.

Their latest release, *Giant Beauty*, differs only in being a CD boxed set release rather than vinyl, and in consisting of five performances recorded over five nights in August 2022 at Stockholm's Golden Circle. The set includes a 100-page book largely devoted to an extensive interview with Wright and with a brief note by trumpeter Nate Wooley devoted to the significance of the group's performances. *Giant Beauty* revisits some works that have appeared in previous recordings—Malik's "Nights on Saturn", "Oud Blues" (also recorded as "Wood Blues") and "El Haris (Anxious)"—along with first recordings of "African Bossa Nova" and "Rooh (The Soul)". While the band's instrumentation will inevitably emphasize the roles of Wright and Thomas, the band eschews the idea of the solo: each piece, learned without recourse to a score, unfolds as a collective improvisation, with emphases changing, individuals occasionally dropping out, but generally committed to continuous invention. They define their method as "No discussion. No plan. No solos." At times, individual roles will defy traditional expectations, every instrument a percussion instrument except Grip's bass line, a fluid ostinato representing melodic content.

The music may seem one-dimensional in its continuous intensity, but that quality is essential to its effect, its very being, which can suggest transformative ritual, séance and dervish dance. It's music, in some ways seemingly narrow, which can also be oddly reminiscent of the breadth of the Sun Ra Arkestra, somehow reduced to a quartet, given Wright's continuum of linked minimalist phrases combining short phrases with abrasive blasts. The almost mixed mantras, incomprehensibly combined with Thomas' epic swing and drive, are suggestive of Ellington (and even Oscar Peterson, a teenage influence) as well as Monk and Cecil Taylor. The combination comes to the fore on an actually rollicking version of "Oud Blues", in which the band finds almost impossible ways to swing—with Wright's elliptical phrases and on-the-beat emphases resisting the momentum, creating the extraordinary tension-and-release curves that stretch past any expected breaking point—and which give this music its unearthly power.

The last night's concert in Stockholm is devoted to "El Haris (Anxious)", the tune they first performed in 2016, but beginning with a special deviation from أحمد [Ahmed]'s usual practice: a bowed bass solo played against Wright's theme statement, in an homage to cellist Abdul Wadud, who had passed away that week. It's a strong, keening melody, drawn from Ahmed-Abdul Malik's first recording, *Jazz Sahara* (Riverside, 1958) with Johnny Griffin.

For more info visit fonstret.bandcamp.com. أحمد [Ahmed] is at Roulette Mar. 25. See Calendar.