

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 aunfidelity.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

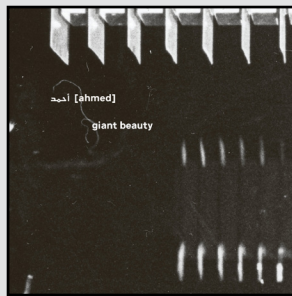
Cornetist Ron Miles' death, three years ago this month, from a rare blood cancer was a loss to the jazz community, but his gently transcendental music endures with Blue Note's recently released *Old Main Chapel*, a recording of his September 2011 concert with guitarist Bill Frisell and drummer Brian 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.