

saxophone solos with stacked squeezed and slurping reed antiphony as well as brassy tongue flutters and spicatto viola slices.

Tarwid's forceful textures, mixed with guitar stings and electronic oscillations, may hold together other tracks such as "Community", but it's his rounded cadences surrounded by electronic crackles and hisses and horn riffs on "Bios" that demonstrates his quieter side. These adroit turns toward the refined are precise without being plodding, and confirm the octet's alternate skills, which buttress occasional fluttering trumpet grace notes, clarion clarinet trills, arco string buzzes and understated drum rattles into moderato showpieces. Positioned polyphony that briefly bring out individual musician's contributions, plus group passages that bow to European notated music history, are also part of NOW!'s imprimatur.

Those attracted by Amba's name, expecting to hear ecstatic free jazz, won't be disappointed in parts. However, they'll also discover aggregate sounds cunningly affiliated by a disciplined ensemble and capable composer.

For more info visit instant-classic.com. Amba is at The Stone at The New School Apr. 2-5 and Le Poisson Rouge Apr. 28. See Calendar.



Portrait
Samara Joy (Verve)
by Tom Greenland

Since winning the 2019 Sarah Vaughan International Jazz Vocal Competition, the arc of vocalist Samara Joy's artistic trajectory has been spectacular. *Portrait*, her third full-length studio release, reflects her growing confidence as a bandleader and lyricist. Like her first two albums, it features Great American Songbook standards such as "You Stepped Out of a Dream", "Autumn Nocturne", "Day by Day" and lesser-known tunes such as trombonist Donovan Austin's "A Fool in Love (Is Called a Clown)". Joy also added more adventurous fare including Charles Mingus' "Reincarnation of a Lovebird" and Barry Harris' "Now and Then", both of which she wrote lyrics for, as well as Sun Ra and Jae Mayo's "Dreams Come True", to which she appended "Peace of Mind", co-written with bandmate Kendrick McCallister.

The album also shows Joy's increased willingness to work collaboratively with her touring septet, which includes McCallister (tenor), David Mason (alto, flute), Jason Charos (trumpet), Austin (trombone), Connor Rohrer (piano), Felix Moseholm (bass) and Evan Sherman (drums). After three years on the road, the last spent working up material for *Portrait*, she and they have developed a flexible yet cohesive musical esthetic that draws on their individual strengths, with everyone except Rohrer and Moseholm contributing written arrangements to the project. The four-horn section pumps like a big band, each chair holding a skillful soloist. To recapture the immediacy of a live concert, the album was recorded like a classic Verve blowing session: everyone playing together in the same room at the same time in (Rudy) Van Gelder Studios, with no more than a few takes for each track.

Joy, front and center of this worthy outfit, continues to develop as a vocalist. In her high, head register, her strongest suit as a singer, she can render lyrics with the supple melismatic finesse and precise tuning of Ella Fitzgerald, her harmonically adroit ears finding choice

color notes, her scatted lines and ornamental cadenzas a wonder; or she can become a fifth horn in the section, singing lead trumpet parts on the tutti sections of "You Stepped Out of a Dream", "Reincarnation of a Lovebird" and "Day by Day". Other times she's deep in her warm chest register à la Sarah Vaughan, lending an old-soul quality to her readings of songs such as "Autumn Nocturne" and "Peace of Mind/Dreams Come True". Her mid-range, often belted, is more strident, adding a conversational quality to her otherwise hornlike timbre.

For more info visit ververecords.com. Joy is at Carnegie Hall Apr. 30. See Calendar.



Hopium
Dayna Stephens (Contagious Music)
by Terrell K. Holmes

Saxophone titan Dayna Stephens adds another gem to his oeuvre with his new album, *Hopium*. With Aaron Parks (piano), Ben Street (bass) and Greg Hutchinson (drums), Stephens has created an album of imaginative, challenging originals that are excellent in construction and execution, with the leader's inimitable playing and composing at its heart.

Album opener "Drive North to Find the Oranges Out West" starts right off with his signature silkiness on tenor, initially brooding within the wide spaces, searching, probing and measured. Even Stephens' high notes are somewhat even-tempered. Parks provides oblique and elegant phrasing that enhances the song's searching theme, while Hutchinson and Street engage in lively discourse, driven by the drummer's apparent impatience. The bassist's percolating intro sets the pace for the quick-tempered "Jump Start". The band works off the saxophonist's spiraling alto riffs, testing the rhythm's tensile boundaries. On the beautiful ballad "Trust", the players pick up on each other's thoughts to build seamless and cohesive harmonies. The title track, besides being a mischievous portmanteau, is a clever mashup of a tango and a military march, intense and emotional all the way up to its unresolved ending. Stephens' bluesy tenor raises the curtain on "Occasionally Cynical", but it's the persistent six-note figure and its variations that propel this song like a spaceship getting a gravity assist from a large planet. The pianist plays an internal dialogue like two people at odds with each other, while the bassist and leader sound amused at the disagreement. Parks' composition "Hard-Boiled Wonderland" is in the classic hard bop vein, and the quartet improvises vigorously over the sparkling rhythm. Guitarist Charles Altura joins the group for the closer, "As Truth Rises Above Power", adding another layer of color and harmony, and playing complex chords with fluidity and grace.

But throughout, Stephens is the unquestionable star. His composing and leadership are exemplary, and he plays his saxophones passionately without being haphazard or ostentatious, hitting flute-like high notes or getting down to the deep blues effortlessly. His playing is not about ego but about his truth. The entire quartet shares this versatility and commitment, which is what makes *Hopium* such an excellent album.

For more info visit daynastephens.net. Stephens is at Smalls Apr. 11 (with Ben Wolfe) and The Jazz Loft Apr. 19 (with Darrell Smith's Del Segno Trio). See Calendar and 100 Miles Out.

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