



**After Bach II**  
Brad Mehldau (Nonesuch)  
**Solid Jackson**  
MTB (Criss Cross)  
by Tom Greenland

“In my improvised solos,” writes Brad Mehldau in the liner notes to *After Bach II*, “I want to make melodic phrases that carry harmonic implication, and create harmony that moves in a melodic fashion”—a succinct appraisal of what the Baroque era composer can teach today’s jazz musician. On two recent releases, solo piano and quintet, Mehldau reveals how deep study of Bach has made him a more effective storyteller.

*After Bach II* (companion to 2018’s *After Bach*) renders, remodels and reinvents works from Bach’s *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, *The Goldberg Variations* and a partita. Mehldau the interpreter is heard on relatively faithful readings of four preludes (Nos. 6, 7, 9, 20), a fugue (No. 20) and the allemande movement of “Partita No. 4 in D Major”, his touch lighter, more relaxed than classical concertizers. Mehldau the improviser is heard in short, spontaneous compositions introducing, connecting or summarizing the compositions that inspired them: “Prelude to Prelude”, preceding a prelude; “Between Bach”, connecting a prelude to its fugue; “Postlude”, reflecting on the previous prelude. A loose interpretation of *The Goldberg Variations* theme leads to six improvised variations, three in thorny

5- and 7-beat meters. Finally, Mehldau the composer is heard on the epic-length “After Bach: Toccata”, a harmonic hailstorm with fast, galloping triplet figures, blue-note melodies and tiered chords. At one point the texture is so thick the piece sounds like a piano duet. Some of the recording’s most transcendent moments occur during the improvised cavatina, an organic hybrid of Bach and bop; the softly ecstatic “Aria-like” (theme to *The Goldberg Variations*) and “Variation IV-Breakbeat”, where Mehldau’s storytelling is both funky and ethereal.

*Solid Jackson*, by MTB (riffing on OTB, an ‘80s young-lions supergroup), reunites a similarly talented unit whose band debut was *Consenting Adults* (Criss Cross, 1994). Three decades later, it’s interesting to hear how Mehldau, Mark Turner (tenor), Peter Bernstein (guitar), Larry Grenadier (bass) and Bill Stewart (replacing original drummer Leon Parker) have both matured and remained true to their essence. Now middle-aged lions, they’ve all proven themselves, so an atmosphere of collective respect, open ears and a deep familiarity pervades the project. Everyone contributes repertoire: two originals by Mehldau, two by Bernstein, one by Turner and three uncommon but choice covers. Accompaniment is spare and solos run short. Turner, well capable of scorching statements, is relatively relaxed throughout, simmering on Wayne Shorter’s “Angola”, dialing up the heat on his own hard-bopping “1946” and Bernstein’s “Ditty for Dewey”. The guitarist’s gorgeous tone, heard to fine effect on the pianist’s ballad “Maurys Grey Wig”, adds an essential color. Grenadier’s solos over the title track (by Mehldau) and Hank Mobley’s “Soft Impression” are equally tuneful and dramatic. Stewart, elsewhere supportive, comes to the fore at the end of “1946”. Mehldau excels everywhere, especially his thematic development on Bernstein’s “The Things That Fall Away” and his soulfully cerebral soloing on “Soft Impression” and (inspired perhaps by Turner’s preceding solo) “Ditty for Dewey”. Bach would’ve been proud to claim him as a student.

For more info visit [nonesuch.com](http://nonesuch.com) and [crisscrossjazz.com](http://crisscrossjazz.com). Mehldau plays solo at 92NY Apr. 23. See Calendar.



**Parlour Games**  
Tim Berne/Michael Formanek (Relative Pitch)  
by Brad Cohan

By the time this duo set was recorded live in 1991 at The Parlour in Providence, RI, Tim Berne and Michael Formanek were already proven scene-linchpins in the avant garde jazz movement. The alto and baritone saxophonist and the bassist, respectively, were both in their mid-30s and had growing catalogs on their own merits (Berne had already even served up two recordings on the major Columbia label at this juncture) with a wealth of touchstones to come that would alter the landscape—hugely influential albums that still reverberate to this day. *Parlour Games* can be pointed to as the catalyst that sparked the vital trajectory of Berne and Formanek’s then-early, blossoming creative partnership. A second duo set would arrive seven years later (the terrific *Ornery People* via the Little Brother label) but *Parlour Games* stands as an undeniable game-changer in ‘90s-era American improvised music.

From the program’s onset, the duo’s dynamic is palpable, the rhythmic intensity and keen-eyed focus

not letting up for a moment during its epic 54-minute length. The melodic fervor is truly on another level over the six improvisations that comprise this release. The absence of drums isn’t noticed in the least; Formanek’s monster work on contrabass fills that void with deft aplomb. “Beam Me Up”, the album opener, will leave one in awe. In an instant, the two are in lockstep, Berne unleashing a flurry of boppish salvos on baritone, while Formanek matches him note-for-note before going off on a tremendous solo turn that showcases his herculean strength. The set only gets better from there. The following “Ho’ Time” and “Quicksand” slow the bouncy vibe down a tad but it’s no less bracing. Both are slow-burning, bluesy numbers with Berne rattling off smoky phrases that approach film-noir soundtrack or *Chinatown* territory as Formanek holds down the fort with walking bass lines that sizzle.

It’s the wild and warm conversational aspect of *Parlour Games* that makes this record so unique; these two players speak in a musical call-and-response language only they are seemingly privy to, as evidenced by standouts “Not What You Think” and “Bass Voodoo” in which Berne’s seemingly effortless passages on alto, along with Formanek’s gentle-meets-physical plucking and bowing, alter the senses. In listening to this powerful document 34 years after the fact, this much is clear: this duo were at the top of their game, world-class improvisers who dialed into and created a zone of telepathic-level depth and superb musicianship.

For more info visit [relativepitchrecords.com](http://relativepitchrecords.com). Berne is at Nublu Apr. 3 and The Jazz Gallery Apr. 12. See Calendar.



**Dream A Dream**  
Satoko Fujii Tokyo Trio (Libra)  
by Bill Meyer

The discography of pianist, accordionist, composer and improviser Satoko Fujii contains multitudes—a moving target numbering 144 entries as of last month—a number that will undoubtedly and exponentially grow. The total to date documents the evolution of the many band associations of Fujii, some formed around a combination of personalities and others designed to investigate a particular musical concern, from solo to orchestra.

The Tokyo Trio, founded in 2019, is her third engagement with this venerable piano trio. The first fact one must acknowledge about it, is its practicality. Aside from Fujii’s enduring musical relationship with trumpeter Natsuki Tamura, many of her ongoing associations are with players on other continents. While three of the four players in her two previous piano trios were American, she, Takashi Sugawa (bass) and Ittetsu Takemura (drums) all live on the same island, Honshu. Musically and geographically, however, they get around: while the group’s first two albums were recorded in concert in Tokyo, *Dream A Dream* was recorded in a Paris studio.

The trio showcases both the breadth of Fujii’s musical conception and the three players’ attunement to each other. The album’s five pieces include bristling improvisations, boldly romantic statements and abstractly dramatic explorations of extended technique, often switching between modes within a single piece. The 19-minute title track, for instance, begins with contrasting left-hand tumbles and inside-piano sweeps

that evoke thunder and lightning. Then a passage of reticently-seething bowed bass and clattering percussion ushers in an imploring, cohesive keyboard melody, which yields in turn to a sparse pizzicato solo dimly illuminated by drum skin resonance. Each episode is patiently explored and each transition feels natural, but the music ends quite a distance from where it began. Within each passage, the players complete the emotional and sonic message being projected, and at each turn, they negotiate the transitions so fluently that you might not notice them until after they’ve happened. The Tokyo Trio is a working ensemble, fluent in its own language.

For more info visit [librarecords.com](http://librarecords.com). The album release concert is at Ibeam Brooklyn Apr. 2. See Calendar.



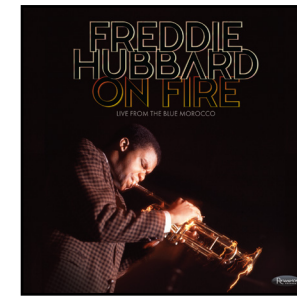
**Joe Fonda & Bass of Operation**  
Joe Fonda (Fundacja Sluchaj)  
by Elliott Simon

*Joe Fonda & Bass of Operation* is nestled at the intersection of jazz improvisation and classical chamber music. Led by bassist Joe Fonda, his quartet features Michael Rabinowitz (bassoon), Jeff Lederer (clarinet, bass clarinet, flute) and Harvey Sorgen (drums). The album offers seven original compositions by the bandleader, each highlighting the group’s synchronicity and the individual players’ improvisational chops. Rabinowitz, a trailblazer in the world of jazz bassoon, is a standout performer and central voice in this project, demonstrating extraordinary agility and a rich, expressive timbre that raises an important question: why isn’t the bassoon more commonly featured in jazz?

The opener, “Déjà Vu for DC” sets the tone with a steady, grounding bass groove, supported by intricate doubling between clarinet and bassoon. This vibrant texture gradually evolves into an improvisational dialogue, allowing each instrument to express its unique voice while maintaining a cohesive group feel. The dynamic shifts perfectly mirror the ensemble’s ability to balance structure with creative freedom, yielding a sense of both order and spontaneity.

“Soon to Know” begins with intriguing time signature changes, followed by a cyclical bass line that creates a hypnotic pulse, anchoring the listener. As the piece progresses, a dramatic shift occurs halfway through, with all elements becoming freer as well as scattered. The second half of the track showcases Fonda’s expressive bowed bass technique, which adds depth to the evolving soundscape, transforming the composition into an immersive, emotional journey. “Magic” opens with a simple motif that is as upbeat as it is catchy, offering a striking contrast to the glacially slow and deliberate conclusion, featuring haunting bass clarinet and bassoon. The change in tempo and mood draws the listener deeper into the track’s contrasting expressive landscapes. The album culminates with “Mosaic”, an 11-minute journey offering an extended platform for the quartet’s improvisational prowess. The track becomes an expansive exploration of the group’s technical ability and creativity, a fitting finale to an album that seamlessly fuses the worlds of jazz and classical chamber music.

For more info visit [fsrecords.net](http://fsrecords.net). Fonda is at Mezzrow Apr. 3 (with Alvaro Torres and Barry Altschul), Saint Peter’s Church Apr. 13 (as leader) and The Guggenheim Museum Apr. 27 (with Brenda Bufalino). See Calendar.



**On Fire (Live From the Blue Morocco)**  
Freddie Hubbard (Resonance)  
by Sophia Valera Heinecke

Instigator and icon, trumpeter Freddie Hubbard’s 87th birthday would be this month (he passed away in 2008 at age 70). Heard at peak prowess on this previously unissued 1967 performance, the trumpeter and his band are captured in inconceivable one-take perfection by recording engineer Bernard Drayton at the since defunct Bronx venue, the Blue Morocco (this month Resonance Records is also releasing an album recorded by another trumpeter, Kenny Dorham, from the same locale).

In recording Hubbard’s first recurring working band: Bennie Maupin (tenor), Kenny Barron (piano), Herbie Lewis (bass) and Freddie Waits (drums), this incandescent evening captured the depth and breadth of the bandleader’s original compositions and his innovative style of trumpeting—a state of saxophonic flow with phrasing influenced by the likes of John Coltrane and Sonny Rollins.

The 3-LP “Record Store Day” special (also available as a double-CD), *On Fire (Live From the Blue Morocco)* begins with “Crisis”, possibly the shortest 18 minutes you’ll ever experience. Time is altered, flowing between distinct sections, so much so that listeners could lose themselves in these mesmerizing riffs. The epic energy provides unity, harmony and breakaway in Hubbard’s sixteenth note sprints and elegant overlap, all of which evokes a smart arrangement of the players, each performing to move towards a collective goal. On the 13+ minute “True Colors/Breaking Point”, Barron holds the low end and bounds up and down the keys. At points it seems two drummers are heard, yet it is only ever the multi-rhythmic Waits. His ten-minute lead-out solo seems impossible, fading into almost silence before lifting the band up again. The pianist cements what makes this album special in a statement included with the liners: “It’s not just that we could play all kinds of music. In one piece, we would go from straight-ahead to avant garde and switch on a dime... you could tell where (Freddie) wanted to go, and we would just go there with him.”

Without losing intensity, world-bending shifts in tone bring us to “Up Jumped Spring”, something fluttering, floating down to listeners with Barron’s long trails of single-note lines. Though the melodies and playing of “Crisis” as well as “Summertime” are memorable, “Breaking Point”, one of Hubbard’s most venerated compositions (and the title track to his Blue Note album three years prior), provides a solid and recurring anchor (it closes out each CD, as well as Sides D and F on the LP edition). Its theme is a jubilant relief that allows Maupin’s audacious riffs to crest on top of sonic waves. This second rendition is delivered at breakneck speed. It may close out the set but sustains its vivacity.

*On Fire (Live From the Blue Morocco)* is both an integral document and a conduit for the energy of doing, of existing in the highest spectrum of feeling, expertise and collaboration by five masters, two of whom are fortunately still with us (Maupin and Barron).

For more info visit [resonancerecords.org](http://resonancerecords.org). “The Music of Freddie Hubbard” (with Louis Hayes) is at Jazz Forum Apr. 4-5. See 100 Miles Out.

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