



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 "Maury's 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 and crisscrossjazz.com. Mehldau plays solo at 92NY Apr. 23. See Calendar.

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. Berne is at Nublu Apr. 3 and The Jazz Gallery Apr. 12. See Calendar.

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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



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