

DROP THE NEEDLE



Berlin Concert
Schizophrenic Blues (Live in Berlin)
Noah Howard (FMP-Cien Fuegos)
by Pierre Crépon

Raised in New Orleans and having served an apprenticeship on the West Coast, alto saxophonist Noah Howard (1943-2010), who would have turned 82 this month, made his first recording in New York in 1966 in the midst of the free jazz explosion famously documented by ESP-Disk'.

This pair of Cien Fuegos (via Trost) long overdue reissues, which were both originally released on FMP, catches him one decade later. Howard had become a Paris resident, a veteran of a bygone era, and he was now a musician *working* on the European circuit. *Berlin Concert* and *Schizophrenic Blues (Live in Berlin)* are related in several respects. Both include free jazz drumming legend, expatriate Oliver Johnson (whose credits include Alan Silva, Anthony Braxton, Rolf Kühn and a long tenure with Steve Lacy) and each

album was taped at West Berlin's Quartier Latin club (respectively in 1975 and 1977). The two recordings would first appear in the line that FMP reserved for projects outside of its core European free-music aesthetic and both are also essentially explorations of the quartet format that was central to Howard (percussionist Lamont Hampton contributes a fifth voice to *Berlin Concert* without altering the balance). With all those similarities, Howard still manages to very successfully unify segmented and far-from-obvious programs for each release.

"I realize the music I play now is different from the one I played in the States in the '60s," Howard told *Coda* magazine in 1975. "An artist is supposed to evolve. I wouldn't want to be there and probably in some years I wouldn't want to be here. I simply have reached another plateau." After the quartet he co-led with tenor saxophonist Frank Wright (until 1971)—a band that was often seen as exemplary of free jazz' extremes—one thing that reaching this new plateau entailed was repertoire diversification. Next to free pieces, Howard made more room for lyricism, for gospel and blues influences. The sound of the 1975 band heard on *Berlin Concert* is significantly affected by pianist Takashi Kako, who came to freer jazz after a relatively recent relocation from Japan to France and who studied under Olivier Messiaen. Kako adds surface on which the shadow of the classic Coltrane

Quartet is cast. The reference is made explicit by a seriously intent reading and interpretation of Coltrane's "Olé". The New Orleans-themed "Marie Laveau" is another highlight: special attention should be paid to bassist Kent Carter's uncanny arco textures, at times reminiscent of throat singing.

On *Schizophrenic Blues*, trumpeter Itaru Oki, one of Japan's most original musicians, joins Howard, providing a sort of loose free counterpoint to Howard's assured, Jackie McLean-inspired tone, and also applying an important lesson of the previous generation: silence matters. Completing the quartet is bassist Jean-Jacques Avenel (who would soon work prolifically alongside drummer Johnson in many Lacy projects). The first side of the album ranges from the title track to a Stevie Wonder pop number ("Birds of Beauty"), followed by an Albert Ayler-inspired "Fire March". Following a "Solo Sax" introductory feature, the album's second side concludes with a moving rendition of what is often referred to as the Black National Anthem, "Lift Every Voice and Sing" (1900).

There are other albums that document this phase of Howard's career, but these two original FMP titles are quite likely the best in terms of sound, production and performances. And they are a welcomed return to circulation, each a limited edition vinyl reissue.

For more info visit trost.at



Looking Back
Richard Baratta (Savant)
by Ken Dryden

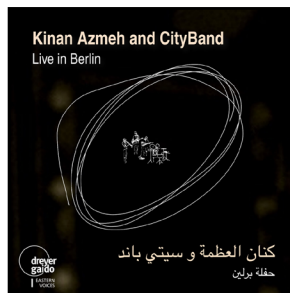
Over the years, jazz artists have recorded pop and rock songs of the '60s and '70s with mixed results—all too often they fail to take enough chances to expand on the original songs, or they pick unpromising tunes that don't seem to work in a jazz setting. But baby boomers who were in their teens or early twenties when these songs first hit the charts will be delighted by drummer Richard Baratta's *Looking Back*, which features pianist Bill O'Connell's settings of ten hits. Assembling a top-notch band that includes Vincent Herring (alto), Paul Bollenback (guitar), O'Connell (piano), Michael Goetz (bass) and Paul Rossman (percussion), Baratta brings new life to these old favorites through O'Connell's inventive and refreshing arrangements.

The playful, breezy Latin setting of James Brown's "I Got You (I Feel Good)" is a masterpiece, showcasing Bollenback and O'Connell, though it is Herring's lyrical alto that stands out. Jimi Hendrix' "Purple Haze" is transformed by removing its signature vamp and focusing on its melody, as Bollenback's laid-back guitar provides a terrific contrast against the original. The dreamy rendition of The Beatles' "Lucy in the Sky With Diamonds" enhances its hidden lyricism, then a sudden switch to an Afro-Cuban mood brings out an entirely different perspective. Led Zeppelin's "Whole Lotta Love" (based on Willie Dixon's "You Need Love") seems like it simply wouldn't work in a jazz setting, but the Latin vibe with electric piano, and Bollenback's far more subdued guitar this time, keeps the number percolating without ever losing steam.

O'Connell's lush solo introduction to another Beatles selection, "Hey Jude", sets the table for a rich treatment, although the addition of vocals to its overly long Afro-Cuban refrain is superfluous. The brisk scoring of Otis Redding's "Respect" (rearranged and made famous by Aretha Franklin) is fueled by Goetz' infectious bass undercurrent, with great and effective solos all around. Transforming The Rolling Stones' music into viable jazz vehicles has been a bit more challenging than the numerous lyrical ballads penned by Lennon/McCartney, but the bluesy interpretation of "You Can't Always Get What You Want" would get any club audience on its feet.

Throughout the album, it is Richard Baratta's creative percussion lines that provide the glue that holds each selection together in finding the right groove and inspiring his musicians to bring life to this very successful date.

For more info visit jazzdepot.com. Baratta is at *The Side Door* Apr. 13 and *The Django* Apr. 18. See *100 Miles Out and Calendar*.



Live in Berlin
Kinan Azmeh and CityBand (Dreyer Gaido)
by Jim Motavalli

Syria-born, Brooklyn-based clarinetist Kinan Azmeh was classically educated but took time out to play saxophone in rock bands. A prolific composer and scorer, he is also a multi-faceted global stage collaborator. *Live in Berlin* (recorded in 2021 at Berlin's Pierre Boulez Concert Hall) features Azmeh's CityBand, which was formed in 2007 in New York—with Kyle Sanna (guitar), Josh Meyers

(bass) and John Hadfield (drums)—and performed its NYC release concert recently at Joe's Pub (Mar. 1).

Much of the album's music was written after 2011 and the start of the Syrian uprising—it is deeply emotional, with strong Middle Eastern influences. Like many of Azmeh's compositions, "The Translator" starts out mildly and builds gradually to an emotional peak, with Sanna's strumming a key support, and Hadfield knowing just when, and when not, to play. "Daraa" (birthplace of the revolution), circling around a folk melody, is full of keening sadness, yet the drummer's percussion stands out for its delicate uplift. "Jisreen" is almost program music, speaking of cities reduced to rubble, and opener "The Queen Commanded", led by the world's loneliest clarinet, is similarly melancholic. "Dance" is a highlight of the record, as it was at last month's Joe's Pub concert. It begins with a moving, circular figure by Azmeh, gathers steam as the band joins in, and soon attains an attractive *joie de vivre* before catching its breath halfway in with Meyers' restless bass and Sanna's never-clichéd guitar playing to the fore. The leader may have started quizzically, but he got his questions answered and soon was soaring. As he said on stage, this is one number that has nothing to do with Bashar al-Assad and his brutal regime—the theme is about free human beings expressing themselves. "It moves me fundamentally to be sharing this music in the new incredible landscape that Syria is going through," Azmeh said at the concert.

Syrian weddings are celebrated with dancing and music from a percussive and devotional "arada" band. Azmeh's "Wedding" puts Sanna and Hadfield up front before his own thrilling, full-tilt entrance. The dancing gets frenzied in parallel with Azmeh's clarinet playing, until the music stops abruptly halfway. Then, on moment's notice, everything is suddenly back on maximum throttle, revealing how these long-serving band members are so attuned to one other.

Azmeh has certainly heard significant Western clarinetists, but he has taken those influences and created a very distinct, personal approach, given his unique background and roots. His music is a fusion worth celebrating.

For more info visit dreyer-gaido.de