



Play Mary Lou Williams
Adam Fairhall & Johnny Hunter (Discus Music)
by John Sharpe

There have been a few album-length reappraisals of the work of the late Mary Lou Williams in recent years, but this terrific set from the Manchester, U.K.-based pairing of pianist Adam Fairhall and drummer Johnny Hunter manages to be both one of the most traditional and the most adventurous. Williams, whose birthday and deathaversary fall on this month (b. May 8, 1910 - d. May 28, 1981), was a pianist, composer and arranger who worked with many big names, but never quite received her due. In the last 25 years, though, there have been notable tributes. Pianist Geri Allen's Mary Lou Williams Collective performed and recorded *Zodiac Suite: Revisited* (2000-3) and then, with Oliver Lake, Reggie Workman and Andrew Cyrille's Trio 3, Allen celebrated Williams' compositions in 2010 (at Birdland and documented on Intakt). Of more recent vintage, the Paris-based Umlaut Big Band tackled a number of Williams' less-covered charts (2021), bassist Jeong Lim Yang released *Zodiac Suite: Reassured* (2022) and Aaron Diehl and the Knights Orchestra also revisited *Zodiac Suite* (2023).

Like the aforementioned Trio 3 and Umlaut projects, *Play Mary Lou Williams* here includes a rendition of "Roll

'Em", a Williams blues composed for Benny Goodman's band in 1937. The duo's version begins straightforwardly enough, with rollicking boogie-woogie piano shadowed by crisp drum figures, then gradually loosens its moorings, briefly regaining equilibrium before completely relinquishing the beat in a series of darting conversational exchanges and flurries of ivory, wood and skin. Other cuts similarly weave in and out of time and tune, subject to a range of inventive approaches that manage to sound organic rather than forced. But that's not to say the musicians don't play off the themes on occasion, extrapolating on particular motifs or moods. "Lady Be Good", purloined by Thelonious Monk under the title "Hackensack", offers a case in point, taken on a far-reaching excursion, which nonetheless retains familial resemblance to the original. This approach is even more so in the poignant valedictory reprise that closes the album.

Fairhall has noted that the piano-drums format is one favored in both stride (e.g. Willie "The Lion" Smith with Papa Jo Jones) and free music (e.g. Don Pullen with Milford Graves), and in these hands it serves more than adequately for both styles. Fairhall enhances the period feel by his use of upright piano, while Hunter restricts himself solely to snare drum. However, that decision in no way limits his expressiveness, as can be heard from his tappy, scratchy improv textures on an otherwise stealthy interpretation of "Nicole". The joyous renditions of Williams' material are clearly full of affection, even as the pair deconstruct, fragment and even totally abandon them. Ultimately, the merry confluence of jaunty swinging grooves and spirited digressions into the weeds enriches both.

For more info visit discus-music.org. Juilliard Jazz' Mary Lou Williams Ensemble is at Blue Note May 3. See Calendar.



The Best of Berlin
Peter & Will Anderson (Arbors)
by Scott Yanow

Irving Berlin (1888-1989) wrote an estimated 1,200-1,500 songs during a period between 1907-66, including dozens of what would become well-known standards and many more that have occasionally been recorded through the years. On *The Best of Berlin*, Peter Anderson (tenor, clarinet) arranged 13 of Berlin's songs for a quintet/sextet that includes twin brother Will Anderson (alto, clarinet, flute), Rossano Sportiello (piano), Neal Miner (bass), Chuck Redd (drums) and special guest Wycliffe Gordon (trombone, vocals).

While it is mentioned in the liners that these performances cover a wide range of styles, in reality this is a '50s-style mainstream session with occasional hints of New Orleans jazz and '30s swing. The Anderson brothers have very complementary styles no matter which horns they are playing. Sportiello is one of the great pre-bop and stride pianists around today, while Miner and Redd swing at every tempo and have some short solos along the way. It goes without saying that Gordon (who appears on about half the selections) is always a major asset.

The album opener is the composer's first big hit,

"Alexander's Ragtime Band", a song that ironically signaled the end of the ragtime era. After a chorus of stride piano, the three horns play a Dixieland-ish ensemble, split a chorus and then trade four- and two-bar phrases before the happy jam closing. Throughout the set the solos tend to be concise and the arrangements have a few, subtle surprises. Even though all of the songs may be well known, these renditions ultimately sound both fresh and lively.

Among many album highlights: the interplay between Peter and Will's playing of, respectively, tenor and flute, on "How Deep Is the Ocean"; Gordon's surprise vocals on "Cheek to Cheek" and "Puttin' on the Ritz"; Will Anderson's Phil Woods-esque alto feature on "They Say It's Wonderful"; and the uptempo "All By Myself". Every selection (even a somber "What'll I Do") is a joy and there are no throwaway numbers.

The Andersons' *The Best of Berlin* is a must for fans of swinging (and sometimes rollicking) jazz.

For more info visit arborsrecords.com. The album release concerts are at Symphony Space May 8, and Three West Club May 18 (part of Gotham Jazz Festival). See Calendar.



Ballads
Noah Preminger (Chill Tone)
by George Kanzler

In a tenor saxophone jazz milieu dominated by John Coltrane's immense influence, Noah Preminger offers this collection of seven ballads with a definite nod to the style of the late Stan Getz. In case there's a doubt about his intentions, they're made clear by the opening track, Al Cohn's "Stan's Mood", a piece written for and recorded by Getz. True to the title, the tracks (four of the seven are Preminger originals) are all taken at variations of slow and very slow tempi. Joining Preminger (tenor) in his quartet are Julian Shore (piano), Kim Cass (bass) and Allan Mednard (drums). "Stan's Mood" follows the template of Getz' original recording (available on YouTube), Preminger sticking close to Cohn's original melody throughout. The leader also adheres closely to the melody of Mark Kozelek's (for his group Sun Kil Moon) "Carry Me Ohio", the rhythm section laying down the song's folk-rock crawl beat under the saxophonist's trance-like repetitions of the simple melody.

Those two covers are a prelude to four originals at the heart of the album. Expectations for a jazz ballad album usually include familiar, memorable and/or indelible melodies, often culled from the classic, popular music of the Great American Songbook. Preminger attempts to create his own such standards, although one of the four, "Democracy", has distinct echoes of "I'll Be Seeing You". On the other three numbers, he leans heavily into repeating the melodies, ruminatively on "Unfair World", hypnotically on the martially dirge-like "In Our 20s" and expansively on "P N E U", his tenor saxophone careening into high arpeggios from the melody lines. The album ends with an exquisite rendition of George Gershwin's indelible "Someone to Watch Over Me", tenor and pizzicato bass murmuring the two A sections before piano and drums join in on the bridge; Preminger embellishes the last A section as he begins a brief improvisation leading back to the Gershwin theme and a lyrical coda ornamented by piano flourishes.

For more info visit chilltonerecords.com. The album release concert is at Smalls May 29. See Calendar.

BOXED SET



Classic Vanguard Jazz Piano Sessions
Various Artists (Mosaic)
by Ken Dryden

Producer John Hammond worked with jazz artists and record labels, although it was his love of classical music and high-fidelity recording that led him to produce jazz records for the classical label Vanguard. A magazine article in which Hammond scolded record labels for their poor recording technique led to an invitation for him to produce a new sub-label, Vanguard Jazz Showcase. The excellent acoustics of the recording venue, Masonic Temple in Brooklyn, plus their single microphone technique, led to numerous outstanding 10-inch records made between 1953-58, before the venture ended. This is the second Mosaic boxed set of highlights, with all sessions being complete rather than scattered over more than one release.

The first set is a trio led by Count Basie drummer (Papa) Jo Jones with brothers Ray and Tommy Bryant (piano and bass, respectively). Ray had worked on several record dates with Jones, while this was Tommy's first encounter. The highlight of their meeting is the pianist's infectious "Cubano Chant", a work that became a jazz standard, while his "Little Susie" would also become a repertoire staple. Throughout the session, the trio is of one mind, with Jones' skillful percussion and nimble brushwork fueling the leader's often frenetic piano playing. "Ol'Man River" is an extensive showcase for Jones' chops on both sticks and brushes (of the latter, he was one of jazz' true masters). Sir Charles Thompson is often overlooked for his contributions in spite of his long career, in part due to spending his final years living and working in Japan. The Swing Era pianist is featured on four tracks with Basie's rhythm section, including Freddie Green (rhythm guitar), Walter Page (bass) and Jones (drums). The easygoing but lively take of "Honeysuckle Rose" is the standout track. His trio date with Skeeter Best (guitar) and Aaron Bell (bass) is just as strong: Thompson's "Sonny Howard's Blues" is a rambling, catchy theme, while the inclusion of the then-current pop song "Mr. Sandman" surprisingly swings in Thompson's able hands. Bobby Henderson died in obscurity in 1969, but he is comparable to Fats Waller in his approach to piano. Due to his infrequent recordings and long gaps from playing in public, he has been overlooked, but this 1956 solo session finds him in great form interpreting a number of Waller's songs, including a laid back "Squeeze Me" and romp through "Handful of Keys". His striding take of the oldie "Sugar" stands out as well.

Mel Powell had a background in both classical and jazz prior to joining Benny Goodman in the '40s and leading his own record dates, before he left jazz behind until near the end of his career. The four sessions from 1953-55 feature different instrumentation. His septet with Buck Clayton (trumpet), Henderson Chambers (trombone), Edmond Hall (clarinet), Steve Jordan (guitar), Walter Page (bass) and Jimmy Crawford (drums)

is heard on four standards. In the rousing setting of "'S Wonderful", Powell introduces Chambers, Hall and Clayton in turn before the full ensemble is heard. The pianist's brisk arrangement of Eubie Blake's "You're Lucky to Me" has the air of New Orleans jazz in the loose ensemble passages, while it swings at a brisk tempo throughout the song. The date concludes with his three movement "Sonatina for Piano", which reflects his continued interest in classical music. His trio with Paul Quinichette (tenor) and Bobby Donaldson (drums) is a breezy date, with Powell showing the influence of Teddy Wilson in his bass lines at times, especially in a spirited arrangement of "Avalon", where he also shows off a bit of stride playing mastery. The third session features Powell in a trio with Ruby Braff (trumpet) and Donaldson again. Braff would become known for his abrupt dismissal of many modern composers in his later years, but he seems afire in his meeting with Powell. The pianist's challenging and very modern "Thingamajig" demonstrates the unique chemistry of the trio, while his angular "Bouquet" reveals that Braff could be at home when presented with offbeat compositions, though it does evolve into a more standard swing setting. The ballad mastery of Powell's duet with Braff in "You're My Thrill" makes one wonder about the music that could have been produced had they recorded an entire duo session together. The fourth date is a mix of several different lineups recorded in a single day. The whispered tone of "Gone With the Wind" in the trio with Tommy Kay (guitar) and Arnold Fishkin (bass) brings out its lyricism. Powell's scoring of trumpet, clarinet and tenor saxophone in the ensemble to his "Bunny Hug" and "Cooch" gives these swing vehicles a distinctive sound. The pianist's trio with Braff and Donaldson (reprising their group from the previous year) yields a sassy rendition of "Beale Street Blues" and features both muted trumpet and open horn in a boisterous take of "Rosetta".

The final two CDs feature a pair of dates by Braff and pianist Ellis Larkins. Braff found a kindred spirit in Larkins, known for his work with vocalists, notably Ella Fitzgerald, so adding anyone else would have upset the mood they created. One disc is devoted to a variety of standards, highlighted by their extended, intricate workout of "Love for Sale". Their somber take of the gospel song "A City Called Heaven" has the air of a requiem. Both men also contributed originals. Larkins' soulful "Blues for Ruby" is a leisurely affair with muted horn, while Braff's "Blues for Ellis" is a rollicking, upbeat number. The final disc is devoted to the music of Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart, performed in a way that is hard to match. It seems likely that both musicians knew Hart's lyrics from their imaginative lines: their brilliant conception of "Blue Moon" is both subtle and brash, transforming it from a quiet ballad to a showstopper, and their heartfelt rendition of "Little Girl Blue" is spacious and elegant.

The audio is outstanding throughout this set and deserves to be heard on headphones for full effect. The work of the original engineers and the new mastering by Shane Carroll brings out the music in the best light. Adding to its desirability are the numerous period photographs and detailed liner notes, penned by Thomas W. Cunliffe for this volume. With a limited edition of 5,000 copies, *Classic Vanguard Jazz Piano Sessions* should be considered essential for Swing fans.

For more info visit mosaicrecords.com

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