



The Circular Train
Ava Mendoza (Palilalia)
Of It But Not Is It
Ava Mendoza/Dave Sewelson (Mahakala Music)
by Andrew Schinder

Guitarist Ava Mendoza has risen to prominence by straddling the line between jazz, blues, rock and the avant garde for a number of years. She leads the trio Unnatural Ways, which has made both literal and figurative noise on the New York experimental rock scene. She has also been a staple of “best female guitarists” lists that may highlight her chops but also, even in this day and age, the unfortunate relative rarity of women who shred in comparison to an historically male-dominated realm.

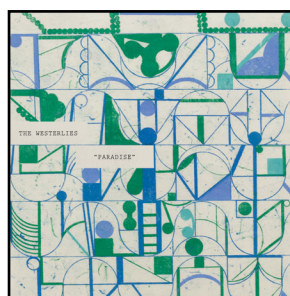
Mendoza released two albums last year, both relatively stripped-down but neither leaving the listener with any doubt about who they are dealing with on guitar. *The Circular Train* is a fully solo affair—no rhythm section, no fancy production, no frills—just Mendoza, her guitar, her occasional vocals and an amp that goes to eleven, and that’s all she needs. On *Of It But Not Is It*, she is joined by baritone saxophonist-vocalist Dave Sewelson, and the chemistry between the two is sizzling: they manage to find groove and accessibility in an inherently difficult setup, operating under the guise of “free jazz” while still finding structure and theme in the compositions.

Of the two, *The Circular Train* is the more personal release, which is to be expected given the individuality of the work. Composed over a period of several years, the album explores the time and place of Mendoza’s California upbringing through her development as a musician. The title is meant to be taken literally; the train in question chugging through stations representing different points in her career. On tracks such as opener “Cypress Crossing” and “Ride to Cerro Rico”, bluesy riffs abound, along with a healthy callback to early ‘90s grunge (and grunge’s godfather, Neil Young), as well as Thurston Moore-esque guitar noise. “Pink River Dolphins” features vocals and would have the makings of a pretty solid indie rock hit, if she were so inclined. Closer “Irene, Goodnight” is the collection’s most direct callback to the traditional blues that ultimately grounds the recording, and is a fairly straight-ahead rendition of the classic, Leadbelly-composed blues standard, losing much of the noise from the other tracks, but none of the power.



Sewelson proves to be the perfect complement to Mendoza on *Of It But Not Is It*. The veteran saxophonist brings a grimy, sleazy accompaniment to the guitarist, and the songs inhabit the depraved, crime-ridden worlds imagined by such authors as Elmore Leonard or Carl Hiaasen (in particular, with “Mangrove Sea”, a seemingly explicit reference to Florida). On this album, it is Sewelson’s turn to provide his vocal talents, on tracks such as “Turnip Wine” and “Do Nothing Man” (both with lyrics by gonzo bassist William Parker). Sewelson’s throaty singing is, to put it politely, unconventional, but fits the mood perfectly. Mendoza doesn’t let up on the riffing, however, as she ultimately manages to break through monstrous saxophone lines to own the record with her emotional, masterful guitar work.

For more info visit palilalia.com and mahakalamusic.com. Mendoza is at Roulette Jun. 4 (part of Vision Festival). See Calendar.



Paradise
The Westerlies (Westerlies Records)
by Jeff Cebulski

The eclectic brass quartet The Westerlies has occasionally tapped into the Appalachian folk tradition, and its new album *Paradise* is a tribute to it. Motivated by their artistic curiosity and by its love of the unique folk artist Sam Amidon, the ensemble put aside its normally spacious production values to concentrate on an austere approach that preserves the reverence of the Sacred Harp, shaped-note song tradition that Amidon was raised in. While not really a “spiritual” endeavor, the group’s new album is fed by the musically egalitarian church folk genre of the 18th and 19th centuries that created a sanctified ambiance. The arrangements throughout reflect a respect for the hymns while the ensemble investigates all the harmonic possibilities.

The horns’ interplay—beautifully performed by Riley Mulherkar and Chloe Rowlands (trumpets) and Andy Clausen and new member Addison Maye-Saxon (trombones)—seems to represent the polyphony of voices inherent in the tradition. On the title song, Amidon himself sings in an unevenly-pitched manner, reaching deep into his past to conjure fractured congregational harmonies. His counterpart, the neo-folk singer Aoife O’Donovan, who contributed to trumpeter Dave Douglas’ own hymn collection *Be Still* (Greenleaf Music, 2012), sings “Weeping Mary”. The arrangement isolates O’Donovan with accompanying trumpets, one in-step and another providing a drone, before the trombones enter to add depth. Three other shaped-note songs receive interpretation. “Fight On” opens the album with a two-trumpet ostinato of sixteenth notes atop bouncing trombones. “Parting Friends” features a breathy intro from Clausen that leads to a spacy, electronic palette for individual elegiac commentary. “Louisiana”, a concert favorite, returns The Westerlies to its jauntier chamber expression. The melodic repetition is rendered in a joyous mien before evolving into a postmodern cacophony. The other tunes on the album include group compositions. Clausen’s “The 5:10 to Ronkonoma” is the jazzier piece, featuring a Mulherkar modal solo and mid-song group improvised interlude, enhanced by producer Philip Weinrobe’s deft in-the-moment processing. Rowlands’ “Kerhonkson”

is a companion to “Louisiana”, further elaborating the group’s uncanny interplay.

The buoyant eloquence and *joie de vivre* of *Paradise*—including an unplanned revisit to the title cut played for the benefit of Weinrobe’s in-studio infant daughter Petra—creates a honorific beautification of a valued American cultural phenomenon, offering our currently divided nation a bucolic and thoughtful tonal alternative.

For more info visit westerliesmusic.com. The album release concert is at Public Records Jun. 11. See Calendar.



Everybody Loves Johnny O'Neal
Johnny O'Neal (Cellar Music)
by Marilyn Lester

How can you not love Johnny O’Neal? He’s a fun guy, and at age 68 he’s been around long enough to know how to work an audience. *Everybody Loves Johnny O’Neal* was recorded live in 2018 at Pyatt Hall in Vancouver, BC, with Luke Sellick (bass) and Itay Morchi (drums). (Note, though, that the sound quality is disappointingly uneven.)

The leader is at his kookiest best, an entertainer with OG chops—alternately singing, scatting, inserting commentary and piano playing, all seemingly spontaneously, with the audience eating it all up. The eight-tracks of O’Neal artistry begin with an instrumental of “Chicago”, setting the record straight that while he may clown around and know how to have fun, there is serious skill at work. This rendition is a swinger, unleashing a flood of creative ideas and pianistic gambits in an Art Tatum-esque mode (he played Tatum in *Ray*, the Ray Charles biopic starring Jamie Foxx), with flourishes, glissandi, runs and busy work for both hands in balance. More serious piano playing comes with a medley: an inventive “Come Sunday” full of flourishes, invoking a church service, and then seamlessly melding into “Did I Ever Really Live”, half sung, half spoken as a plaintive prayer of a ballad.

Clearly energized by the live crowd, O’Neal croons, shouts out, adds commentary, scats and otherwise communicates musical thoughts (and lyrics) in a jazzy parlendo. In the blues of “Home Boy”, he pretty much covers all of these bases, the first half of the tune all quirkily vocal, with piano entering thereafter. More jazz parlendo and scat dominate the closer, “The More I See You”, which also includes some audience participation encouraged by the leader (and those in attendance audibly made it clear that they sure do love Johnny O’Neal). As a vocalist, his unique approach to scat also looms large on “Tight” and in a vocalese delivery of “Destination Moon”. Through the lens of O’Neal, two cuts are fairly “traditional.” “Love Letters” offers a swinging crooner, witty piano passages and quick tempi changes, bookended with narrative notes addressed to the writer of those love letters. “Where or When” has a lovely bass intro that glides into a vocal and proceeds to straight piano for most of the rest of play.

An artist like O’Neal, immensely and musically talented yet also comedically gift-wrapped, is best experienced live. But lacking that opportunity, *Everybody Loves Johnny O’Neal* is a fine surrogate experience to the real thing.

For more info visit cellarlive.com. O’Neal is at Cellar Dog Jun. 3 and Zinc Bar Jun. 9. See Calendar.