

DROP THE NEEDLE



Blues for Smoke
Jaki Byard (Candid)
by Duck Baker

Blues for Smoke represents the earliest recording under the name of pianist Jaki Byard (1922-1999), yet it remained unissued for decades, as did many other Candid titles that were recorded during the brief period between the label's founding in 1960 and going dormant a couple of years later. Candid has since been recently rejuvenated with new recordings, as well as LP reissues of its catalogue, and such is the case here: the all-analog session was remastered from the original tapes by legendary engineer Bernie Grundman and pressed on 180g vinyl.

Listeners should not expect *Blues for Smoke* to focus on the kind of cutting-edge jazz that the late Byard (born 103 years ago this month) was playing around this time with artists he recorded with, such as Charles Mingus and Eric Dolphy (who were also signed to Candid). There are wild moments to be sure, but these occur during pieces that begin in a much different vein: "Jaki's Blues", for instance, which starts out as a rollicking stride blues theme, albeit one on which a couple of chords are definitely what pianist James P. Johnson would have called "modernistic." Within 20 seconds, however, Byard has launched himself towards the harmonic stratosphere, without ever abandoning the 12-bar format. He gleefully bounces almost violently between these stylistic extremes throughout this jam-packed, two-minute foray.

Commentators have noted Byard's eclecticism since he first attracted critical attention in the early '60s. Indeed, the way he shifted into real Harlem stride or rich Billy Strayhorn-esque harmonies is impossible to miss, and something Mingus often showcased. But with Byard this style is often more a matter of juxtaposition than of synthesis, a method that sets him apart from other jazz pianists. Consider the cases of Thelonious Monk, Herbie Nichols, Lennie Tristano, Bud Powell, Randy Weston and Cecil Taylor, all born within five years of Byard. Except for Nichols, they all arguably evolved one approach and stuck to that, since they could be endlessly creative within their stylistic worlds. Nichols had an entirely different approach when playing with more traditional leaders (and even on his earliest recordings as a leader), but his style could also be more elastic than the others named above. This focus, however, was a matter of synthesizing, not juxtaposing, older and more modern ideas. Interestingly, a couple of the best tracks here, "Aluminum Baby" and the brilliant "Diane's Melody" are somewhat evocative of Nichols, though Byard takes the latter into areas neither Nichols nor anyone this side of Olivier Messiaen would go. As Byard fans know, both of these pieces would get many more recordings in years to come, but fewer realize that they had been premiered in the '50s by Bostonians in trumpeter Herb Pomeroy and alto saxophonist Charlie Mariano. Byard was known in Boston (even as a saxophonist) for a decade before New York had really heard him.

Blues for Smoke is a must for Jaki Byard fans, especially those who want to focus on the way he reworked stride and blues/boogie-woogie, but for those who want an introduction to this unique piano great, his Prestige records are the place to start.

For more info visit candidrecords.shop.musictoday.com



Deep Space
John Blum Quartet (feat. Marshall Allen)
(Astral Spirits)
Live In Philadelphia
Marshall Allen Ghost Horizons
(ArsNova Workshop/Otherly Love)
by Patrick Romanowski

Marshall Allen is, of course, the recently-turned 101-year-old leader of the Sun Ra Arkestra, having joined in 1957 and taken over the band after Ra's immediate successor, John Gilmore, who passed away in 1995.

Released in honor of Allen's 100th birthday last year, pianist John Blum Quartet's *Deep Space* is a blistering voyage into the outer reaches of the contemporary avant garde. By adding Allen to the Blum trio, the piano heavyweight's compositions surge with explosive energy and virtuosic exploration. Perhaps not so widely-known to many, Blum has a presence in NYC's downtown scene (having recorded with the likes of trombonist Steve Swell, the late drummer Sunny Murray plus a few records under his own name), and is highly regarded for his percussive, yet melodically-oriented style. The album features Allen (alto, EVI), alongside Blum, Elliott Levin (tenor, flute) and Chad Taylor (drums). The centenarian plays with extraordinary vigor and masterful creativity. The album opening title track features Allen's use of the extraterrestrial sounding EVI (Electronic Valve Instrument) which sets a fluttering, roving atmosphere, a kind of wandering membrane that blips and echoes at the celestial pitch and threshold of every vast improvisational climb. Blum's command is captivating and intense. Mercurial and marvelous in equal measure, and at times reminiscent of the great Cecil Taylor, he propels the music with fearsome volleys of staccato notes and fists full of bold chords. On "Electromagnetism" and "Gravity Well", Levin's flute playing punctures the enveloping plasma of sound like a steel dart, while Taylor's drums drive a fierce, punching rhythmic undercurrent. "The Aether" is a mammoth and convex journey that closes out the set with a luminous bang. *Deep Space* is a wild ride—one well worth checking out.

Marshall Allen's *Ghost Horizons' Live in Philadelphia* is a fantastic, celebratory testament to the indefatigable creative genius of the saxophonist and composer whose 101st birthday on May 25 coincided with the release. Recorded in Philadelphia, where Allen has lived in the Germantown neighborhood at the Arkestral Institute Of Sun Ra since 1968, the album is comprised of 16 tracks, gathered from a concert series which began in 2022, organized by the ArsNova Workshop at the Solar Myth venue. As evidenced, Allen continues to perform live with awe-inspiring energy and profound creative fluidity. Along with original Arkestra guitarist DMHotep, the feel of the performances harken back to some of the key rhythmic essences and vivid musical galaxies within the Arkestra canon, while the tracks are saturated with a fresh, pulsating vibe that inhabits some of the earlier musical realms of Allen's signature '50s work with Ra. The result is a superbly hip re-imagining of those cosmic dimensions in a more expansive contemporary mode, with Allen at the helm as a celestial bridge and a spiritual touchstone to the Arkestra for a new generation. The tracks oscillate between roaring and wide-open, hard-swinging numbers, with longer meditations interspersed with spiritual passages, poetry and vocal riffs. Sonorous interplanetary sound

explorations are ignited with lucid Motorik doses of cool driving Can-esque feels—all of which are deeply elating. In keeping with the ever-evolving ensemble spirit of the Arkestra, the stellar line up of musicians represents a wide range of voices from across the contemporary musical spectrum including Immanuel Wilkins, James Brandon Lewis, Elliott Levin, Brian Marsella, William Parker, Eric Revis, Luke Stewart, Chad Taylor, Tcheser Holmes, Mikel Patrick Avery, Tara Middleton and Michael Ray, plus the Ade Ilu Lukumi Batá Ensemble and the experimental noise outfit Wolf Eyes. Ra referred to Philadelphia as "death's headquarters" but Marshall Allen's enduring genius is a divine light that continues to burn miraculously bright in defiance of any earthly leviathan. What an honor to behold.

For more info visit astralspiritsrecords.com and arsnovaworkshop.bandcamp.com. Allen's *Ghost Horizons* album release concert is at Public Records Jun. 6. Allen with Sun Ra Arkestra is at Issue Project Room Jun. 11 (part of MATA Festival) and Pioneer Works Jun. 20. See Calendar.



Chicago to New York
Eric Alexander (Cellar Music)
by Ken Dryden

Saxophonist Eric Alexander is a Chicago native who made his recording debut with organist Charles Earland, soon after moving to New York to study at William Paterson University. There he was mentored by high-energy pianist Harold Mabern (1936-2019), resulting in the pair becoming frequent collaborators. Over his extensive discography, which includes many albums with the all-star co-operative One For All, Alexander has ultimately proven himself as one who isn't overly influenced by any of his predecessors, though his playing is well-grounded on the foundation of great recordings of the past.

This top-drawer session, *Chicago to New York*, features another New York-based musician and frequent Alexander collaborator, pianist Mike LeDonne, with Chicago players Dennis Carroll (bass) and George Fludas (drums). Right out of the gate, the leader establishes his chops on soprano with an intense interpretation of Mongo Santamaria's "Afro Blue" (often conflated with John Coltrane, as on the saxophonist's *Afro Blue Impressions*), punctuated by LeDonne's Mabern-like attack on piano. The leader remains on the straight horn for Coltrane's infrequently performed "Wise One", ceding the spotlight to LeDonne, whose serpentine solo sets up Alexander's enchanting performance on the soprano.

Alexander returns to tenor, his main horn, for a punchy, soulful rendition of the standard "This Is Always", fueled by the swinging rhythm section. Another standard not heard very often these days is "Only the Lonely", where the subtle work of Carroll and Fludas support the leader's warm, vocal-like tenor playing. This miniature masterpiece features his spacious phrasing, indicating that he most likely took the sage musical advice of Lester Young, Ben Webster and Dexter Gordon to know a ballad's lyrics. The quartet's rendition of Gene Ammons' soulful blues "Hittin' the Jug" suggests the closing number of a late set, where the musicians have given their all and are ready to head home. Perhaps the biggest surprise in the album is the extended workout of the chestnut