

BOXED SET



New York City
Miha Gantar (Clean Feed)
by Stuart Broomer

In 2022, Slovenian pianist-composer Miha Gantar launched his recording career in a highly unusual way via the Clean Feed label, in what was for them a new format—a boxed set of five CDs, entitled *Introducing*, housed in a lightweight cardboard box. Each disc, in its own light cardboard sleeve, offered minimal information: personnel, track titles and recording data (all produced by Slovenian drummer-composer Dré Hočevar) with varying personnel, ranging from solo to a duo (with singer Marta Arpini) to trio (with bassist Tijs Klaassen and drummer Tristan Renfrow) to an astonishing quartet (with trumpeter Axel Dörner and drummer-percussionists Gerry Hemingway and Christian Lillinger), concluding with an orchestral composition with Gantar joined by nine winds, two bassists and two drummers. Annotation was non-existent, except for perhaps the best kind: a 200-word endorsement from trumpeter Nate Wooley, a musician of both brilliance and integrity, concluding with “What you hold here is special, as close as an object can come to giving us that kind of insight to the broad expanses within a single musical aesthetic. It is not a purist’s document; it’s too human and intimate for that. In all, the chance to experience Miha Gantar’s ideas all together like this feels right; it provides an insight into a complete mind.”

Clearly, that presentation of the whole musician in an economy format worked. In 2023 Clean Feed then released a companion five-CD Gantar set entitled *Amsterdam*, with a similarly brief and inspired

endorsement, this time by octogenarian bassist Reggie Workman, another musician of rare authority.

New York City, recorded during two weeks in August 2023, is Gantar’s third such set in three years, though there’s nothing larger than a quintet here. Each CD is devoted to a single piece with both an album title and a separate title for the individual work and each highlights a different aspect of the pianist’s music, whether rhythmic, lyrical or expressionist. Regardless, there’s a continuous creative involvement tying the work together.

Disc One, *Ultima*, presents the most immediately familiar format and personnel of these works: a traditional jazz piano trio with the estimable rhythm section of John Hébert (bass) and Eric McPherson (drums), both of whom have served similar roles with pianists Fred Hersch and the late Andrew Hill. Hill might be the best reference here, though, for Gantar takes a similarly dense harmonic approach wedded to a moody lyricism, rhythmic force and complexity, and a compelling spontaneity that makes the most of the accompanists’ simultaneously thick, thoughtful and empathetic support throughout the 33-minute exploration of “Synopsis (1)” and “(2)”.

The leader is seemingly made for the third stream, embodied most clearly here on the second CD, *Transitions*, consisting of an hour-long piece entitled “Parisian Nocturne” and performed with Doori Na (violin) and three members of the Bergamot Quartet: Sarah Thomas (violin), Amy Huimei Tan (violist) and Irène Han (cello). It’s remarkably subtle work, shifting through myriad moods, its lines at once independent and interwoven, whether spiky, translucent, gritty, flickering or evanescent.

The third disc, *Sanctuary*, provides immediate contrast with Gantar, joined in a duo with tenor saxophonist Zoh Amba with the sole piece, “Exodus”, running to 47 minutes. Amba is the sole collaborator involved in the set to get a co-composer credit, so one assumes collective improvisation. While a kind of reverie stretched to these lengths might weigh on some listener’s patience, the work generally sustains attention. Gantar creates a delicately evolving, reverberating and circular lacework in the middle

and upper registers of the piano, while Amba largely explores a surprisingly lyrical bent, entering and returning during the first 30 minutes with some of the subtlest melodic tenor one might imagine, her sound at times almost oboe dry, its deviations into quietly dissonant multiphonics profoundly moving. Her re-entry around the 30-minute mark is in her more characteristically expressionist voice, with the squawks, honks and runs a striking shift amidst Gantar’s recirculating lines. The saxophonist returns at the piece’s end with the kind of extended hypnotic reverie with which the piece began.

Disc Four is another trio, this one with two percussionists: Kweko Sumbry (drums, hand percussion) and Jeremy Dutton (drums). Curiously, given the surfeit of naming here, the CD is entitled *Angels* and the 47-minute composition “Angles”. Rapid-fire drumming opens the proceedings with Gantar soon joining in with animated upper-register pointillist abstraction and hard-edged middle-register clusters that will initially suggest a kind of Cecil Taylor scattershot. However, the trio gradually evolves into some of the best-developed extended improvisation here, with sustained percussion passages balancing Gantar’s improvisations. Of principal interest is the continuous rhythmic dialogue as it develops among the three musicians, directional shifts occurring with Gantar’s brief withdrawals to allow the drummers to reshape the ground. There’s some brilliant bongo drumming on Sumbry’s part and a Gantar solo that is rich in the harmonic density that characterizes much of his work. The final CD, *Towards Purity*, consists again of a single track, “To My Love”, an abstract, dream-like solo reverie filled with eliding phrases that will range from gently hanging, glassy dissonances to delicate shifts in harmonic direction.

In all, the budget boxed set format presents a broad introduction (even with this being the third such set) of Gantar, an emerging musician exploring multiple paths with an innate creativity and a distinct ability to sustain extended works.

For more info visit cleanfeed-records.com

cuts through Burnett’s cymbals, which take up a good deal of sonic space. A yell of approval is heard as the pianist finishes, and it’s surprising it took that long to get a vocal reaction from the crowd. In “Miss Who”, the rhythm section inspires Pepper to tell everything he knows, and he still has stories left when he finally steps aside.

If the fidelity of the recording leaves something to be desired (the piano often sounds like it’s in the next room, and Dumas’ bass is felt moreso than heard), the rawness helps to capture the ambience of the New Morning, the club where the performance took place. For proof, the drama in Pepper’s reading of Gordon Jenkins’ downer “Goodbye” is on full display.

An Afternoon in Norway might have a leg up in packaging since, in true Elemental Music form, it includes a vintage interview with Pepper himself, and current talks with Laurie, surviving band members Dumas and Burnett, and two alto saxophonists that might not come to mind when discussing Pepper: John Zorn and Rudresh Mahanthappa. Nevertheless, the only thing really missing from *Geneva 1980* is more of Pepper’s chilled out stage patter. But the music more than makes up for it.

For more info visit elemental-music.com and omnivorerecordings.com



Gadabout Season
Brandee Younger (Impulse!)
by Jason Gross

Brandee Younger has shown herself to be the rare talent who crosses from jazz into classical, R&B and hip-hop realms without sounding desperate or strained. Even more impressive is that she excels at this versatility on the harp, in the tradition of Alice Coltrane and Dorothy Ashby (both of whom she’s covered and fêted). Harpists are still somewhat rare jazz players nowadays, but Younger is likely the most well-known of harpists outside of the classical world.

Her eighth album, *Gadabout Season*, was recorded at bassist-producer Rashaan Carter’s NYC home studio, mostly as a trio with Carter and drummer Allan Mednard, plus some impressive guests. “Reckoning” begins with a gentle, swaying vibe as Younger creates flights of fancy over Mednard’s percussive washes. “End Means” has British go-getter Shabaka Hutchings (flute), gently maneuvering around Younger’s delicate plucking, mirrored by Carter’s own buoyant playing. For an all-star, low-key, funky summit, the title track has Shabaka (clarinet), Joel Ross (vibes) and Makaya McCraven (drums), as the ensemble playfully bounces around a lovely theme that occasionally breaks into a wistful atmosphere. “Breaking Point” has the trio in a deeper, high-speed funk mode with Carter providing the rhythm as much as Mednard, while Younger shows off her dexterity with blaring strums.

For the brief, gorgeous “Reflection Eternal”, the trio is much more contemplative, though Younger occasionally gets into intense bits of playing. “New Pinnacle” has a shimmering intro, leading to a sweet melody that she rides on, with some glistening background tones added by pianist Courtney Bryan. On “Surrender”, Bryan returns more prominently, echoing the leader’s inquisitive tones, with the pianist later soloing in a pretty, reflective manner somewhat reminiscent of ’50s West Coast cool jazz. “BBL” has

Ele Howell replacing Mednard and providing some bubbly, cracking bits of drumming behind Younger, whose sound echoes the serene resonance of a Japanese koto. On the soulful ballad “Unswept Corners”, pop/R&B singer Niia creates a choir of mostly wordless voices that hover around the harpist’s lithe playing and subtly shuffling rhythms. On “Discernment”, Josh Johnson’s melancholy saxophone playing contrasts with Younger’s harder-edge performance over a percolating rhythm section as she breaks into guitar-like staccato rhythms and doomy reverb.

In all, this might be Brandee Younger’s most varied set and impressive display of her virtuosity.

For more info visit impulserrecords.com. The album release concert is at Blue Note Jun. 9 (part of Blue Note Jazz Festival). See Calendar.



Bluer Than Blue: Celebrating Lil Hardin Armstrong
Caili O’Doherty (Outside In Music)
by Jim Motavalli

In a fortunate coincidence of time and place, pianist Caili O’Doherty and tenor saxophonist Nicole Glover grew up as neighbors in Portland, OR, and played together in both middle and high school. Here they are reunited on O’Doherty’s historically-minded album release, which serves as a tribute to pianist Lil Hardin Armstrong. Author Alice Randall’s recent *My Black Country: A Journey Through Country Music’s Black Past, Present, and Future* makes the dubious case for cornetist King Oliver veteran Hardin (married to Louis Armstrong from 1924-38) as a pioneer in not only jazz but country music, based alone on the recording, “Blue Yodel Number 9” (with Louis and Jimmie Rodgers). Hardin should also be remembered for her other quintessential recordings and for writing such classics as “Struttin’ With Some Barbecue”, “Two Deuces”, “Just for a Thrill” and “Bad Boy”.

All of the songs on this new release by O’Doherty are Hardin’s, and they’re interpreted in a refreshing range of styles. Since Hardin wrote words and music, it makes sense to feature vocalists. After all, her tunes worked for one of the greatest and most influential singers ever. “Two Deuces” is a duet featuring Tahira Clayton and Michael Mayo, and the sound is modern, recalling vocalese group Lambert, Hendricks and Ross. O’Doherty and Glover both solo effectively, with a bop direction. The saxophonist’s workout is in the exciting, muscular style she seems to favor; it sounds nothing like the original 1929 recording with Earl Hines and Louis, but so what? “Struttin’ With Some Barbecue” is more period, with stride overtones and a bouncy trio format of Israeli Tamir Shmerling (bass) and Houston native Cory Cox (drums). “Riffin’ the Blues”, with the vocalists in wordless mode, has a soul jazz vibe. The leader is way up on this one, as is the range-scraping Glover; Mayo shadowing the saxophonist’s horn lines is a coda highlight. “Let’s Get Happy Together” is a jazz ballad sung very poignantly by Clayton (despite some vibrato issues at the end). Glover contributes ravishing sheets of sound and the leader provides more restrained shimmering as the tune gradually builds intensity. Clayton also takes the lead on “Bluer Than Blue”, “Happy Today, Sad Tomorrow” and Hardin’s best-known standard, “Just for a Thrill”. Both vocalists enliven the bluesy, scat-heavy and film noirish “Clip Joint”.

Purists might expect this tribute to be a note-perfect period piece out of The Cotton Club, but O’Doherty instead chose to demonstrate that these songs are durable, timeless vehicles for all kinds of exuberant jazz.

For more info visit outsidemusic.com. The album release concert is at Smalls Jun. 12. See Calendar.



Roscoe Village: The Music of Roscoe Mitchell
Jason Adasiewicz (Corbett vs. Dempsey)
by Kurt Gottschalk

This month, the Vision Festival (Jun. 2-7) will open with a Lifetime Achievement Award night honoring sound pilgrim, saxophonist-composer Roscoe Mitchell, who soon turns 85. That evening will include *Metropolis*, a stunning new work of Mitchell’s for jazz quartet and baroque ensemble. Meanwhile, on its opening night, the MATA Festival (Jun. 11-14) will present the venerable FLUX Quartet playing his 9/9/99 *With CARDS*. Both pieces will be receiving their New York premieres. Mitchell won’t be playing in either—the focus is on Mitchell the composer.

Mitchell the composer is also the focus of vibraphonist Jason Adasiewicz’ *Roscoe Village: The Music of Roscoe Mitchell*. The bulk of the album’s ten cuts come from records Mitchell released with the Art Ensemble of Chicago from the ’60s to the ’80s, in addition to an unrecorded composition (“The Cartoon March” from the band’s ’60s Parisian residency). Two more are from precursor outfit the Roscoe Mitchell Art Ensemble: the title track from 1968’s *Congliptious* and a lovely take on the 1967 piece “Old”. “Walking in the Moonlight” is a lilting ballad written by his father (heard on the 1984 album *The Third Decade*) and there’s a fairly faithful arrangement of the 1954 Otis Blackwell song “Daddy Rolling Stone”, a Mitchell favorite.

The album opener to this solo vibraphone Mitchell tribute is a seven-minute take on a 75-second track from 1969: “The Waltz”, from the heralded Art Ensemble release *A Jackson in Your House* (though inexplicably left off some reissues); it doesn’t follow the strict three-count of the original but moves around the melody with the grace of a dancer. That release’s beloved title cut (written about Mitchell’s cat) leaves the song’s strut behind, crafting a slow melancholy with simultaneous bow and mallet. The vibraphonist combines the Spanish-tinged 1969 track “Toro” with “Jo Jar”, a 1981 Sound Ensemble piece dedicated to Art Ensemble bandmate, reedist-percussionist Joseph Jarman: the strong theme of the first is laid out and reassembled over a steady pulse, the second slowed to follow suit. “Carefree”, from 1975’s *Full Force*, is likewise slowed to a contemplative repose. “The Key” (just over a minute on 1973’s *Fanfare for the Warriors*) closes the album, excised from its theatricality into a gentle swing.

Adasiewicz recorded this album at home in three days after a five-year professional hiatus. Replicating the high-level group consciousness of Mitchell’s ensembles would be impossible on a solo instrument, but that wasn’t the aim. With ringing vibes, Adasiewicz finds new music within Mitchell’s rich, old structures.

For more info visit corbettvsdempsey.com/records. “Celebrating Roscoe Mitchell - Lifetime of Achievement” featuring Roscoe Mitchell is at Roulette Jun. 2 (part of Vision Festival). See Calendar.

some of the strongest in the Pepper discography.

An Afternoon in Norway: The Kongsberg Concert offers all the telltale signs of a Pepper set. Recorded on June 29 at the Kongsberg Jazz Festival, he sounds loquacious between tunes, joking about European audiences not understanding him, and getting a laugh in the process, or expounding about his cats (“They’re really what’s happening”). For a guy who wasn’t in the best of health, his alto tone comes with a serious amount of heft. Any traces of laidback, West Coast cool style had been replaced by a bite that was sharpened by the hardships Pepper had endured since his early days. “Y.I. Blues” (also known on other releases as “Untitled 34”) launches the set with a stop-start melody that doesn’t reveal its 12-bar blues structure, since everyone participates in the theme. From there, the leader unleashes 13 choruses, five of them with only bass and drums holding him down. Each one presents a new melodic chapter, sometimes abetted by double-time asides, and he never resorts to rhythmic vamping between ideas.

While there is naturally some crossover in the setlist from *Geneva 1980*, both sets feature plenty of variety. On *An Afternoon in Norway*, “The Trip” (the title track to his 1977 studio album) combines a hypnotic 6/4 groove with an understated, slow-burning alto solo that climaxes with gruff honks. Leviev also digs into the changes of this one. If his solo in the lengthy “Make

a List, Make a Wish” doesn’t have quite the dramatic build that it would a week later, it still manages to sustain the momentum. The quartet also delivers aggressive takes on Duke Ellington/Juan Tizol’s “Caravan” as well as the leader’s “Straight Life” (also the title of his lurid memoir). Coming at the end of the set, the latter track always astounds with the complex, rapid-fire makeup of its theme.

Compared to *Geneva 1980*, the Norway set almost sounds slick, thanks to its studio-quality recording, which captures every note with clarity. Of course, that’s not a criticism of either release. The July 5 performance was recorded by his widow Laurie Pepper (there have been several posthumous live Pepper sets that Laurie has released on her Widow’s Taste imprint), but the lower fidelity is only relative. By the time the quartet reached Geneva, they were thoroughly comfortable with stretching out a tune for upwards of 20 minutes. In fact, the only short tracks on it are a set-closing blues and a version of “I’ll Remember April”, which fades only because Laurie’s recorder ran out of tape. (She apologizes in the liner notes, explaining that she was so wrapped up in the performance that she didn’t notice.) Pepper certainly had the ideas to justify the lengthy solos. “Mambo Koyama” builds in dynamics as he spins a rhythmic web, throwing in some tart, Dolphy-esque interjections at one point, pushed the whole time by Burnett. Leviev’s rollicking piano solo