



OK
Snakeoil (Screwgun)
Poiësis

Masayo Koketsu, Nava Dunkelman, Tim Berne
 (Relative Pitch)
 by John Sharpe

Belying his veteran status, saxophonist Tim Berne remains a restless innovator who continues to challenge himself and his collaborators. He leads from the front, not only shaping his own bands with exacting vision, but also pitching his singular sound against the currents of younger improvisers. His alto saxophone playing—alternately cool, bittersweet and sizzling—offers one of the most expressive voices on the scene, one which is still looking forward, still discovering, still playing as if everything depends on it.

For over a decade, Snakeoil has been Berne's principal music laboratory. Across six previous releases, the band has proven adept at navigating his thorny charts, whether evoking chamber abstraction or hard-driving intricacy; but *OK*, an unissued live set from the outfit's first European tour in 2013, might be the most thrilling document yet, bristling with energy and invention. While much of the repertoire is familiar from contemporaneous releases, this archival release features two otherwise unrecorded pieces and expands "Static" from eight minutes in its studio incarnation to a 37-minute tour-de-force. Form and freedom

collide in glorious contradiction, with each member pushing the music further while staying tethered to Berne's compositional core. Critical to the unit's range are Ches Smith (clanking vibes, drums) and Matt Mitchell's instrumental command (piano), which allows him to serve simultaneously as anchor, foil and wild card, plus Oscar Noriega (clarinets) who provides an essential counterweight to Berne—his warmth and purity offsetting the leader's acerbic edge, yet just as capable of ignition, especially fiery on "Incidentals Contract". The leader's writing has always aimed for density without clutter, and Berne's Snakeoil quartet achieves a startling fullness—every line interlocks, recurs and evolves. Nonetheless, there is still room for a rare cover: a spikily impressionistic reading of Paul Motian's elegiac "Psalm", a cooling breeze after the feverish intensity that precedes it.

Poiësis captures Berne in freewheeling interaction with percussionist Nava Dunkelman and Japanese fellow alto saxophonist Masayo Koketsu. For a first-time encounter, the trio exhibits remarkable cohesion. Berne adapts his language to the situation but remains recognizably himself, deploying a soured lyricism, a caustic full tone, and a predilection for linear narrative flow, alongside timely forays towards the extremes to match Koketsu's experimental leanings. While happy with keypad popping, sudden blurts and multiphonic cries, Koketsu operates with a lighter tone and often more fragmented phrasing, but she is not beyond a blue-tinged melody either. As a result it is not always obvious who is playing what. But their conversational agility, willingness to search out common ground and mutual responsiveness are key to this album's success. Dunkelman's distinctive approach—as likely to co-opt metallic shimmer, bell-like resonance and castanet-like clicks as trap-set orthodoxy—engenders both propulsion and contrast, accentuating yet further the date's unique character. Across seven concise, largely high-octane improvisations, episodes of fierce horn interplay are punctuated by textural lulls and subtle recalibrations, maintaining momentum without monotony. The result is a tightly-woven dialogue rooted in free jazz, but enriched by a shared sensitivity to sound, space and surprise.

For more info visit screwgunrecords.bandcamp.com and relativepitchrecords.bandcamp.com. Berne is at Lowlands Aug. 5, 12. See Calendar.

one who quickly adapted and added to the music. The five selections heard on *Live at the Jazz Standard* all appeared on the then-recent studio release, but these intense, often extended interpretations captivate the audience as they reveal new facets.

The original "Waiting for Solitude" is constantly shifting its focus, with Oh's virtuosic extended solo and DeJohnette's nimble percussion complementing Colligan's composition and dramatic piano playing. The drummer sets up "Song for the Tarahumera" with a fiery solo and when the full trio enters, this post-bop vehicle is in full flight, as the pianist's darting lines interweave with Oh's pulsating bass lines and DeJohnette's rhythms to create pure magic. "Her Majesty" is dedicated to Colligan's wife, pianist Kerry Politzer. His introspective solo leads into a lively Latin-tinged theme that commands full attention, giving the bassist ample solo space as well. "Liam's Lament" (written by Colligan for his young son) is introduced by an unaccompanied Oh, with the leader entering on melodica to create a wistful mood along with DeJohnette's skillful percussive effects, conveying a boy seemingly focused in solitary thought. Colligan returns to piano for "If the Mountain Was Smooth, You Couldn't Climb It", which conveys its message of hope without a lyric and concludes the set on a high note.

It seems impossible that this trio was a one-off date due to the chemistry of its members, and it's fortunate for us as listeners that Colligan rediscovered the decade-long hidden recording.

For more info visit whirlwindrecordings.com. Colligan is at Dizzy's Club Aug. 27. See Calendar.



Split Decision

Eric Alexander & Vincent Herring (Smoke Sessions)
 by Scott Yanow

Tenor saxophonist Eric Alexander and alto saxophonist Vincent Herring have been mutual admirers and frequent collaborators for the past 20 years. Counting *Split Decision*, they have appeared together on at least a dozen recordings, which include two Japanese releases (Kizuna and *Live At Smoke*), a pair of albums by pianists Harold Mabern (*Mabern Plays Mabern* and *Mabern Plays Coltrane*) and Mike LeDonne (*That Feelin'* and *Wonderful*), drummer Joris Dudli's *Boundaries Expanded*, as well as major soloists on two albums by The Heavy Hitters sextet, plus Herring's *In the Spirit of Coltrane* and *Cannonball*. And as co-leaders, the two have recorded *The Battle-Live At Smoke* (2005), *Friendly Fire* (2011)... and now, *Split Decision*.

If one thinks of this quintet date with LeDonne (piano), John Webber (bass) and Lewis Nash (drums) as being a saxophone "battle," then the title of *Split Decision* fits. But in reality, this album is very much a cooperative, rather than competitive, meeting. Alexander and Herring have both been so consistent throughout their careers, playing modern hard bop with fire and passion, that as long as they are at the top of their game, their music is going to be magical. That is the case with this, their latest recorded meeting, starting right off with "Pharoah's Dance" (trombonist Steve Turre's tribute to both Pharoah Sanders and McCoy Tyner); LeDonne's playing here is very reminiscent of Tyner's. The quintet is at its best on "Strollin'" (one of Horace Silver's memorable melodies) and Hank



Live at the Jazz Standard
 George Colligan (Whirlwind)
 by Ken Dryden

One of the most intriguing pianists of his generation, George Colligan spent his early career based in NYC, though he left eventually to join the faculty at Portland State University. This live set from the late, lamented venue, Jazz Standard, was recorded in 2014, a gig that Colligan stumbled across on his computer during a quarantine for a COVID infection he contracted in 2021. While based in New York, he developed a working relationship with Jack DeJohnette, playing in his group over several years. The drummer returned the favor by recording for Colligan with bassist Larry Grenadier on *The Endless Mysteries* (Origin), which focused on the pianist's compositions. As Grenadier was unable to make this Jazz Standard club date, the leader recruited bassist Linda May Han Oh, an inspired choice and