



Flashpoints and Undercurrents
John Surman (Cuneiform)

Kristen Noguès/John Surman (Souffle Continu)
The Athenaeum Concert

Lucian Ban, John Surman, Mat Maneri (Sunnyside)
by Marc Medwin

“Be embraced, ye millions,” invokes German poet Friedrich Schiller’s “Ode to Joy”: “This kiss is for the whole world.” There is something of this sentiment in John Surman’s playing. Traditions unite in each expressive tone, and the world is a better place for it. Last year, the multi-instrumentalist celebrated his 80th birthday by releasing the typically and gorgeously uncategorizable *Words Unspoken* (ECM). Now, we are privileged to witness his epic journey via these concert recordings from three similarly boundary-busting vantage points along his illustrious career trajectory, as we join him in celebration of his 81st birthday later this month (Aug. 30).

For context on *Flashpoints and Undercurrents*, a West German concert recording from April 18, 1969, look no further than Brian Morton’s superb liner notes to *Flashpoint: NDR Jazz Workshop–April ’69* (also on Cuneiform). As good as that recording sounds, taped in mono the day before, this double disc, featuring the same ten-piece band of improvising luminaries, resides on another level. The same program benefits from the concert experience’s viscosity, and it’s augmented by eight additional pieces. “Flashpoint” brings an even deeper narrative as Mike Osborne’s alto solo rapidly catches fire following the “New Thing” blast and chordal head. Later, Surman’s baritone proves as scorching as his range is wide, in direct contrast to the exquisite bittersweetness infusing Kenny Wheeler’s trumpet solo on “Where Fortune Smiles”. What a joy to hear the comfortably familiar composition in this luscious arrangement. The rhythm section of Fritz Pauer (piano), Harry Miller (bass) and Alan Jackson (drums) carries this group through a stunning performance from beginning to end.

While the above release exhibits Surman’s musicianship nearest to his fiery “jazz” roots, *Diriaou* and *The Athenaeum Concert* capture his more delicately introspective forays into folk musics, though the unquenchable fire remains. *Diriaou* (Breton for “Thursday”) is a breathtaking collaboration with Celtic harpist Kristen Noguès. Souffle Continu has already reissued Noguès’ 1976 debut, and this 1998 festival recording blurs the boundaries, again between tradition and innovation, as Surman’s soprano etches soft-focus lines around her arpeggios on “Le Scorff”. Dig his aphoristic breath-turn ushering “Kleier” toward silence, and the bass clarinet gracing two disparate versions of “Kerzhadenn”, at several poignant moments doubling Noguès’ voice in octaves as a meditative drone pervades all.

Recorded in June 2024, the LP-only *The Athenaeum Concert* follows on from the 2020 *Transylvanian Folk Songs* project (also on Sunnyside), uniting Surman with the duo of pianist Lucian Ban and violist Mat Maneri. In his notes to the companion digital release of *Cantica Profana*, Ban rightly describes Surman’s contributions to the transcultural qualities of the music they make, and again, comparison to the versions made under studio conditions is instructive, with “Violin Song” representing the whole. Its opening repetitions are taken first by Maneri this time, transposed by an octave and then punched into high gear by Ban in a lower register as the trio eases into the merriment. Gradually, inexorably, all caution is thrown to the winds as the tune builds toward frenzy. Surman’s soprano solo is a

whirlwind of scale, point and fractured line suffused with staggering energy, conjuring the freedoms of 1969 nearly half a century later, and he and Maneri sliding and diving hell-bent-for-leather toward each pitch without ever losing their long-cultivated beauty of tone. Ban rumbles and roars beneath in slowly unfolding concentric waves before it all collapses into that drone and another poignant Surman exhale. The thunderous applause might as well be for Surman’s entire career.

For more info visit cuneiformrecords.com, soufflecontinurecords.com and sunnysiderecords.com



The Jazz Orchestra, Volume 1
Nick Finzer (Outside in Music)
by Pierre Giroux

Trombonist-composer Nick Finzer has reliably and thoughtfully navigated the jazz scene, evident in *The Jazz Orchestra, Volume 1*, borne of years of writing and arranging for large ensembles. Finzer is thus both a skilled orchestrator and a forward-looking successor to the jazz big band tradition. This album developed naturally, and the result is a compelling program that honors the genre’s rich legacy while embracing a modern perspective. A key element of the album’s cohesion is the inclusion of members from Finzer’s long-standing sextet formed in 2012: Lucas Pino (tenor), Alex Wintz (guitar), Glenn Zaleski (piano), Dave Baron (bass) and Jimmy Macbride (drums) comprise the core group, grounding the music in a well-established sense of familiarity and chemistry.

In this six-track set, there are two covers of J.J. Johnson compositions, with the rest being Finzer originals. The album opens with Johnson’s “Say When”, a nod to one of Finzer’s influences and a significant figure in jazz trombone history. In this lively interpretation, the brass lines are bright, crisp and moving. Finzer takes the solo lead with his full tone and smooth style, and the ensemble navigates the complex arrangement with energy and grace. The leader’s “The Guru” follows—a piece that combines reflection with cinematic flair. A slowly developing melody shifts into a harmonic structure that features an especially striking trumpet solo from Anthony Hervey, soaring above the swirling ensemble textures. Finzer’s trombone also plays a key role in shaping the theme.

Johnson’s beloved “Lament” is given a respectful and soulful interpretation, aligning with the legendary Gil Evans and Miles Davis collaboration of the same piece for *Miles Ahead* (Columbia, 1957). The solos by Finzer, Zaleski and Baron are concise yet heartfelt, capturing the essence of the original while adding a modern touch. “We the People” is arguably the album’s rhythmic and political centerpiece. The bandleader suggests that the number represents hope and the collective power of the people to uplift one another. The piece fuses jazz orchestration with a modern sensibility as soloists Finzer (trombone) and Chloe Rowlands (trumpet), along with Pino, Wintz and Macbride, deliver both in intent and execution. “Just Past the Horizon”, the album closer, is an uplifting number that captures the recording’s main theme: honoring tradition while envisioning new possibilities.

For more info visit outsideinmusic.com. The album release concert is at Dizzy’s Club Aug. 25. See Calendar.

ON SCREEN



The Best of the Best: Jazz from Detroit
Daniel Lowenthal
(Magic Circle Productions)
by Paul Gaita

As thorough and entertaining a documentary on a regional jazz scene as you could ask for, *The Best of the Best: Jazz from Detroit* makes a case for the Motor City as a hub for the music on par with NYC, New Orleans, Kansas City and Chicago. Like those centers, Detroit has produced a wealth of talent that has fueled the jazz idiom for more than a half-century. A representative sampling of jazz greats that made Detroit their home includes legends Donald Byrd, Betty Carter, Alice Coltrane, Ron Carter, Paul Chambers, Tommy Flanagan, plus Hank, Thad and Elvin Jones, as well as more recent torchbearers, from Geri Allen to James Carter, Karriem Riggins and Endea Owens, some of whom are featured in interviews or new and archival performance footage in the film. And what the film illustrates in concise and often moving terms is the harmonization of social, political and cultural influences, which gave Detroit not only its fabled grit and determination, but also a spirit of community and education that helped to produce those talents. Director Daniel Lowenthal draws on the traditional documentary paintbox to make his point, with talking-head interviews, news footage and smartly-crafted graphics illustrating the rise of the city during the Great Migration, spurred on by the auto industry. That dynamic in turn fueled the rise of a Black middle class in a suburb known as Black Bottom, which built its own opportunities through businesses, schools and Paradise Valley, an entertainment district that gave the nascent jazz scene performance spaces.

Lowenthal taps many of the players who emerged from that scene to explain the web of influences that had an impact on Detroit jazz, including Charles McPherson, Kenny Burrell and Sheila Jordan. These elements included a strong church background, which taught form and inspiration; an educational system that emphasized music study for boys and girls; and an informal but potent network of mentors who took it upon themselves to pass along their understanding of both theory and performance to young players. *Best of the Best* profiles several of these towering figures, including pianist Barry Harris and trumpeter Marcus Belgrave, who wrought lasting influence on younger generations, as well as other lights of the Detroit music scene from the Jones brothers to Milt Jackson and Yusef Lateef. But the life blood of the film is its careful and thoughtful dissection of that music community, of its need to carry forward the music through connection and education, and how it continues today. (This year’s annual Detroit Jazz Festival is Aug. 29 to Sep. 1.)

For more info visit jazzfromdetroitfilm.com