

THANATOSIS

FOLLOWING A FEW VERY DIFFERENT THREADS

BY KEN WAXMAN

Curiously, the dictionary definition of thanatosis is a “defensive behavior where an animal simulates death to avoid predation, characterized by a state of apparent paralysis and unresponsiveness to stimuli.” And Thanatosis is the name of a Swedish record label, which, since 2016, has released cutting-edge music characterized by a slow build up and gradual development. “To be a goat and play dead to stay alive seems to me like an interesting, creative and possibly effective strategy,” jokes Stockholm-based label founder, pianist-keyboardist Alexander Zethson. “The connection is that I aim to release music that on the surface may seem stagnant but bubbles in the deeper layers. I also see it as a counterpoint to the current mantras in society that tells us to do more, make more, sound more and louder, take space and so on and so forth. Maybe doing less, stepping back, doing nothing can be a radical act of resistance. But of

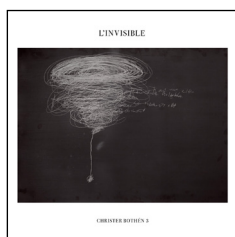
course, the name is paradoxical since I have been living the life of a workaholic during the last few years.” The last statement may be an understatement since the Thanatosis catalogue now includes 44 CD or LP releases, eight download-only and four single releases. And although he likes to concentrate on four releases annually, this year will see 13. “I started the label to release my first solo album, which couldn’t find a home anywhere else,” Zethson explains. “Then a few years later I did the next release, and one by a friend, and realized how much I enjoyed working on someone else’s music.

“There’s a lot of great music out there with extreme dynamics and big expressive gestures, I just wanted to provide something else,” he adds. “I love music that can be listened to in detail, blasted in one’s headphones or at extremely low volume on the stereo, with open windows, so that the music mingles with other sounds. I love the uncertainty of not knowing was that from my speakers or from the apartment or from outside?” Frankfurt-based pianist Miharuru Ogura, who has recorded two albums for the label, and has one in preparation, says that “what I find special about Thanatosis is its openness to a wide range of musical genres with a strong and coherent aesthetic. Thanatosis

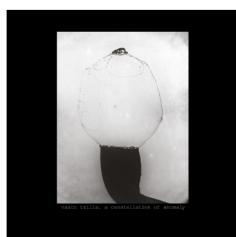
valued my performance and my music, which lies in the field of contemporary ‘classical’ music in a more honest and purely artistic way. It suggests receiving contemporary music in a broader and more open-minded context.”

Although Zethson is the label’s only employee, others help out with design and PR. Usually 300 to 1,000 copies of each release are made. A few titles have sold out: Vilhelm Bromander’s first album, Johan Berthling’s solo and a 7” single by Zethson and Johan Jutterström have all since been re-pressed. Swedish saxophonist Martin Küchen confirms the label’s appeal: “Thanatosis is a very serious and dedicated label that really makes the best of each release. Every detail is thought through from the recording to the mix and master (to) the artwork and cover.” Küchen has recorded two solo discs for the label, a duo with French pianist Sophie Agnel and as a member of Angles and the Vilhelm Bromander Unfolding Orchestra, plus a solo vinyl single is ready for 2026. Three of the label’s albums have been co-released with American labels (and one Italian label). Those productions resulted from Zethson’s admiration for the labels and their US

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 37)



L'Invisible
Christer Bothén 3



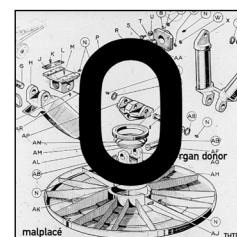
A Constellation of Anomaly
Vasco Trilla



It Could / If I
Alex Zethson/Johan Jutterström



Plays Carter, Plays Mitchell, Plays Shepp
STHLM svaga



Malplace
Organ Donor

VOXNEWS

SHEILA JORDAN: THERE WILL NEVER EVER BE ANOTHER YOU

BY TESSA SOUTER

NOTE: This month's VOXNews column is dedicated to jazz vocal icon, Sheila Jordan (1928-2025), whose passing last month (Aug. 11) has left a huge hole in the entire jazz community.

When Sheila Jordan filled in for Kevin Mahogany in the Four Brothers vocal group with Kurt Elling, Mark Murphy and Jon Hendricks, the band was renamed Three Brothers and a Mother. It couldn't have been more fitting, because Sheila, more than any other, was the mother of all jazz singers. Not in some distant, abstract way, but directly—in the way she sang, lived and taught. I recently found an old email from her, reminding me to have fun on tour, signed: “xoxoxoxoxoxo Sheila – Jazz Mom.” She was an instinctive nurturer, not only to her beloved daughter, Tracey Jordan, but to every singer (her “dearlings”), instrumentalist and audience members lucky enough to be touched by her presence.

Tracey was her heart. But she had room in that heart for anyone who loved the music—and anyone she believed needed a little push, a little encouragement or sometimes a gentle (or not-so-gentle) nudge toward the

truth. She didn't just teach jazz singing; she taught you how to live inside a song, how to tell the truth through music, how to be yourself, how to connect. She passed on the lesson she had learned from her teacher, pianist Lennie Tristano, never to imitate anyone else. She sang her and encouraged you to sing you.

I was lucky enough to be mentored by her for a time. In exchange for running her workshops and booking her private lessons, I got an education no conservatory could have offered. It was during a period when my mentor and teacher, Mark Murphy—one of her many best friends—was teaching in Graz, Austria. But the lessons I learned from Sheila weren't just in the workshop room: they were in every conversation and every performance I ever saw her give. Always the consummate professional, however she felt before a show—tired, ill, grieving—the moment she stepped onto the bandstand she came alive, like one of those spring-loaded dolls that pops upright the instant you release it. I saw her rise to the occasion under circumstances that would have flattened many others: singing with a broken shoulder at Smalls; performing right after open-heart surgery at the London Jazz Festival; taking the stage at her 77th birthday party at Sweet Rhythm, just after the death of her dear friend Shirley Horn; and, only last February, rising from a wheelchair to sing at Bethany Baptist Church Jazz Vespers.

Her knowledge of the music to which she had dedicated her life was immense. At 14, she put a nickel in a jukebox in Detroit and heard Charlie Parker's “Now's the Time”. That nickel changed her life. When she later moved to NYC, she and Parker became friends. He used to say she had “million-dollar ears.” And she did. She seemed to know every song, and she certainly heard all the changes. Music saved her life, she said. Hearing her sing could save yours. Seeing Sheila Jordan in concert was like going to church,

where the pastor says exactly what you didn't know you needed to hear until you heard it. Never forced, she drew her energy from the audience—and gave it back in spades. She was personal, present, preaching from the stage: “Support the music until it can support you!” (She worked as a secretary at an ad agency into her late 50s.) And: “Never give up on your dreams!” She often closed her concerts with, “If I don't see you next time, I'll see you in heaven”—which is reason enough to be good in this life.

She was Love with a capital L—the kind of person who would take the shuttle bus to visit Mark Murphy at the Actor's Home between exhausting tours; invite musicians who had lost their home after 9/11 to live in her apartment for three months; spend a year fixing me up with my husband because she loved us both and “had a feeling” we'd be good together; or invite a roomful of singers to share the stage with her for a blues. One of her favorite sayings was: “Don't be a diva, be a messenger!” And that's what she was, every time. She didn't *do* or *have* concerts—she gave them.

Much has been written about her being overlooked by the press—she was named Talent Deserving of Wider Recognition by the *DownBeat* Critics Poll nine times. But that's not where her focus lay, although she treasured her many awards, including being named an NEA Jazz Master (2011). She was never about ego, or even chops. She was first and foremost about the music, always in the service of the song. Yes, under-recognized by the press, perhaps, but deservedly musician-famous. Extraordinary. Soul-piercing. Playful. Spontaneous. Singular. Inspirational. Iconic. Uncopiable, because how she sang came from the core of her being, and there was only one of her. But what made her truly special, and came across in every note, was not just those million-dollar ears, but her million-dollar heart.

(LABEL SPOTLIGHT CONTINUED FROM PAGE 11)

distribution and retailer experience.

So how has Thanatosis been financed in its almost decade-long existence? “Mainly I’ve used money I’ve earned from playing concerts and touring,” explains Zethson. “The musicians most often contribute themselves, but the exact terms depend on if there’s financial support from somewhere, and for example if I have initiated the project or not. Thanks to a still existing, yet rapidly declining, governmental support for culture, I’ve sometimes been privileged enough to get partial funding from the Swedish Arts Council, and in rare instances other foundations,” he adds. “To record on Thanatosis is a misleading description since most often I receive raw or final mixes,” he clarifies. “I’m getting requests from all over the world; some of them who seem really tuned-in to the label profile feel a musical kinship to it and want to be a part of the catalogue.” Adds Ogura, “(It’s) one of the best organizations I’ve ever worked with. There’s a strong sense of trust, professionalism and hospitality.” As for formats, Zethson says: “I love CDs, they’re a piece of cake to produce, plus they don’t take up much storage space and are cheaper (than vinyl) to send.”

Releases are available through Border Music/Redeye Distribution and on most streaming platforms, but Zethson cautions that might soon change. “I value the physical format far more highly and the streaming platform industry is generally exploitative and problematic in so many ways. Streaming doesn’t at all contribute in any mentionable way to sales. Bandcamp on the other hand is an extremely important tool to reach out with the music and to get some sales. I’m doing physical albums and trying to break even or even go to the plus side, so Bandcamp’s selling tools are a huge value.” While more projects are scheduled for this year, there are no designated tenth anniversary plans (except for perhaps a celebratory live event in Stockholm). The new sessions include a collection of all of Helmut Lachenmann’s solo piano pieces in honor of his 90th birthday, produced by Ogura. Thanatosis is, after all, a boutique label.

Zethson notes: “I’m not interested in appealing to as many people as possible. I’m just trying to create something specific with the catalogue and a whole that follows one or a few very different threads.”

For more info visit thanatosis.org

(LEST WE FORGET CONTINUED FROM PAGE 10)

at Marty’s nightclub in New York. Bassist Rufus Reid was brought in, subbing for Tormé bassist, George Duvivier. Reid recalls that Tormé was initially dubious at the switch, but after assurances from Duvivier, hired him and says that during the gig “it was cool.” Reid adds, “He was a great singer, but he was a hell of a musician...man, this guy had great pitch; he would do an *a capella* thing for almost two minutes, which is a very long time. Then he would finish the phrase and hold out a note, then bring us in. It was always right on the money!”

The late pianist George Shearing had a long association with Tormé and in a 1997 interview with this writer, Shearing explained “in the 1950s, I used to hang out in clubs where we both played. I’d go to hear him and he’d come see me.” They would get together after the shows, playing various tunes. In the ’70s, impresario George Wein put them together at Carnegie Hall for a series of concerts and in the spring of 1982 the pair began recording and touring, which produced six acclaimed albums for Concord Jazz. Shearing said, “I think it’s probably one of the best musical marriages in the business. That man has incredible ears. If I make one change in harmony, because I thrive on spontaneous harmony and changing harmony around

to suit my mood, Mel is on it within an eighth note. You don’t find that with many people.” Pianist-singer Billy Stritch, with his then trio, Montgomery, Plant and Stritch, was their opening act in 1988 at Carnegie Hall. “He couldn’t have been nicer to three kids from Texas,” Stritch says, “and he even greeted my entire family afterward.” Another child prodigy, vocalist Nicolas King shared Tormé’s longtime music director, the late Mike Renzi. King says, “Mel was always among my favorite crooners as a kid, and my appreciation for him only grew when we began doing a lot of Mel’s material. Mel’s musical brain was brilliant, and he heard things that no one else did. When he landed on a certain note, or had an intellectual and soul satisfying arrangement, or take on a song — there’s nothing better.”

Tormé’s career essentially ended after his first stroke in August 1996. Maye met up with him for a visit in his dressing room after his Music Hall concert in Kansas City in June 1996. “As always, when we met, we discussed music, work and laughed a lot,” she remembers. “He was so generous and kind. I must say, he was extremely tired. I’ve never forgotten a remark he directed to me as I was walked down the hall of the theater dressing room area. He called my name and as I turned to answer him, he said, ‘Marilyn,’ and he pointed his finger at me, ‘You take very good care of yourself.’” On August 8, 1999, less than three years later, Mel Tormé passed into musical greatness.

“Mel Tormé at 100: A Celebration with Billy Stritch and Nicolas King” is at 54Below Sep. 12, 14. For more info visit 54below.org. See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Mel Tormé — *Gene Norman Presents Mel Tormé at The Crescendo* (Coral, 1954)
- Mel Tormé — *With the Marty Paich Dek-tette* (Bethlehem, 1956)
- Mel Tormé — *I Dig The Duke - I Dig The Count* (Verve, 1961)
- Mel Tormé & Buddy Rich — *Together Again - For The First Time* (RCA, 1978)
- Mel Tormé — *Live at Marty’s/Encore at Marty’s* (DCC, 1981-82)
- George Shearing/Mel Tormé — *An Elegant Evening* (Concord, 1985)

(LITCHFIELD CONTINUED FROM PAGE 12)

intense Bill Evans-ish reflections to a funkier approach on a Nord Stage 3 digital keyboard.

The late afternoon included the musically simpatico duo of New York-based guitarists **Frank Vignola** (Long Island, New York) and **Pasquale Grasso** (Ariano Irpino, Italy). Some years and geography separate their origins, but when it comes to performing standards, there’s no barriers. Vignola is an established force with more than 30 albums, while Grasso has had a meteoric rise since moving to the US in 2012. The pair were constantly grinning and pointing at each other during virtuosic trading-off treatments of tunes including Jimmy Campbell, Reg Connelly’s 1928 “If I Had You” (with a nod to Bucky Pizzarelli) and the 1918 Layton, Creamer classic, “After You’ve Gone”. On the latter, the tempo started slowly but was soon soaring with flying notes that were each clearly articulated. As a generalization, Vignola sticks closer to the melody and Grasso wildly improvises, but somehow always makes it back to home base. The younger Grasso is the slightly warmer presence, but both have deep respect for what these songwriters of their day accomplished and left them to improvise from and to share with admiring if not astonished listeners. The duo’s art was most on view for their treatment of “Deep in a Dream” (Van Heusen, DeLange), which has been undertaken by everyone from Chet Baker and Frank Sinatra to Buster Poindexter. It’s inherently a beautiful ballad, but they played it with incredible delicacy, tackling its


implications but staying true to the song. Solo slots had Grasso dissecting “Embraceable You” (the Gershwins) with total aplomb, and Vignola merging “Moonlight in Vermont” (Blackburn, Suessdorf) with “Polka Dots and Moonbeams” (Van Heusen, Burke) in a seamless blend. The set closed with a rousing version of Edgar Sampson’s early ’30s hit “Stomping at the Savoy” as well as Mark Stefani’s recent “Inside Out”, a tribute to jazz guitarist Jimmy Bruno.

Modern technology has allowed clarinetist **Anat Cohen** to perform untethered from a stationary microphone. As the Saturday headliner (it was her fifth year to play LJF), Cohen used that mic freedom of movement dramatically. She was in constant motion around the stage, dancing, gesturing and crouching with a soloist the way a rock star might. Her records may be wonderful, but one really doesn’t get to truly know her music until seeing her perform live. The selections on stage were mostly from her Quartetinho group’s second album, 2024’s *Bloom*, performed by her astounding ensemble, with all three sidemen doubling on second instruments: Vitor Gonçalves (piano, accordion), Tal Mashiach (bass, guitar) and James Shipp (vibraphone, percussion). Each member also writes and are credited as co-creators of much of the band’s music, including “Superheroes in the Gig Economy” and “Coco Roccoco”; Mashiach was featured on acoustic guitar for his “Paco”, a tribute to the late Spanish guitarist Paco DeLucia. The poll-winning Israel-born bandleader noticeably has Middle Eastern influences (and klezmer) blended into her sound, but Anat Cohen has also absorbed and mastered pretty much most to all mainstream to avant garde jazz, which she incorporated into another very personal and exciting LJF presentation.

For more info visit litchfieldjazzfest.com

unit

NEW RELEASE
Christy Doran's
May 95 Sextet
«SAME BUT DIFFERENT»



UTR 5103

feat. Christy Doran guit | Herb Robertson tp
Urs Leimgruber reeds | Kevin Bruce Harris b
Fredy Studer dr | Jim Meneses dr

unitrecords.com