

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

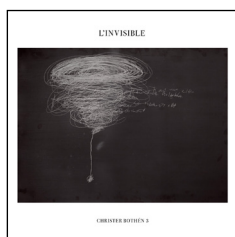
course, the name is paradoxical since I have been living the life of a workaholic during the last few years.” The last statement may be an understatement since the Thanatosis catalogue now includes 44 CD or LP releases, eight download-only and four single releases. And although he likes to concentrate 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

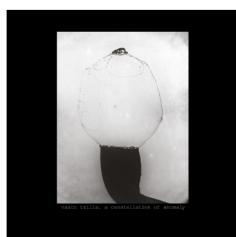
valued my performance and my music, which lies in the field of contemporary ‘classical’ music in a more honest and purely artistic way. It suggests receiving contemporary music in a broader and more open-minded context.”

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



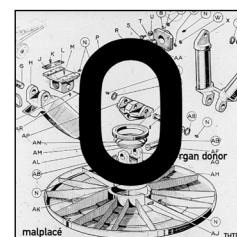
A Constellation of Anomaly
Vasco Trilla



It Could / If I
Alex Zethson/Johan Jutterström



Plays Carter, Plays Mitchell, Plays Shepp
STHLM svaga



Malplace
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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.