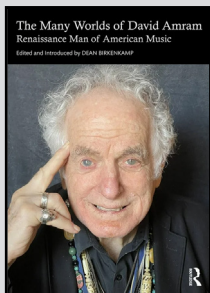


IN PRINT



***The Many Worlds of David Amram:
Renaissance Man of American Music*
Dean Birkenkamp (Routledge)
by Jim Motavalli**

In the case of David Amram, “Renaissance man” is actually accurate: any assessment of the multi-instrumentalist and composer inevitably ends up in a long list of bullet point accomplishments. Even though he’s had 94 years to do it (he turns 95 in November!), the man has simply packed a huge amount of ecumenical achievement into his life. The short version: Amram invented jazz poetry events with Jack Kerouac; took his French horn into innumerable jazz sessions from the ’50s on (e.g. Lionel Hampton, Oscar Pettiford, Charles Mingus) and Third Stream (e.g. Gunther Schuller); beat another path deep into folk and country music; explored Latin styles and detoured to the Middle East; and has had a long and distinguished career writing symphonic pieces—some on folk themes—and film music (e.g. *Splendor in the Grass* and *The Manchurian Candidate*). And he’s still leading his boundary-crossing band.

The Many Worlds of David Amram is an appreciation, complementing Amram’s own autobiographies—*Vibrations: A Memoir* (1971) and *Offbeat: Collaborating with Kerouac* (2008). It’s a great read, subdivided by category: symphonic and chamber music, theater and opera, jazz, folk and songwriting. Each segment is by a contributing writer (including a few by Amram), by definition wide-ranging, and who are usually also his collaborators. Arturo O’Farrill describes Amram as “an honorary Cuban,” adding that he “can invent joy out of any circumstance. He can take three Band-Aids, a fishing hook and rum and build a film score or a *descargo* (Cuban jam session).”

Impresario and trumpet player Mark Morganelli writes of hosting regular David Amram birthday bashes at various venues, including at his Jazz Forum Arts presentations. He praises Amram’s “positive vibe” and notes the artist’s Pied Piper ability to gather people around him. Eventually, he notes, “I began to understand David’s importance not only in jazz but in classical music, theater music, folk music, world music and other artistic genres.” One of the birthday parties attracted the unlikely mélange of writer George Plimpton, film director Elia Kazan, comedians Jerry Stiller and Anne Meara and TV talk show host Bill Boggs. Reading the book is not only to marvel at the man’s works, but to feel a goad to get on with your own projects. Amram sets a high bar, though.

The late writer and wit, Malachy McCourt, notes, “David Amram is not an ordinary human being, even though he puts on the appearance of ordinariness. He does not play music. Music plays him.” The final word can go to David Coles, who states, “David does not defy convention so much as embrace *every* convention while refusing to be confined to any.”

For more info visit routledge.com. Amram is at St. John’s in the Village Sep. 19 (part of The Village Trip Festival). See Calendar.



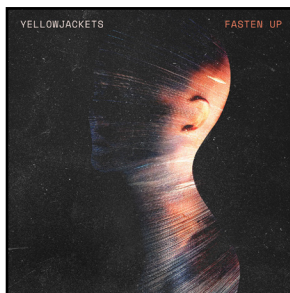
***Live from Somewhere Nowhere*
The Hot Toddies Jazz Band (Prohibition Productions)
by Scott Yanow**

The Hot Toddies Jazz Band, originally organized half a dozen years ago, has appeared every Wednesday night at NYC’s Somewhere Nowhere club since 2022, performing swing music and hot jazz that is filled with enthusiastic and celebratory joy. Like the best current-day retro bands, they play vintage songs with youthful energy, reminding listeners and dancers that during the Swing Era, most of the big band and hot combo musicians were in their twenties and thirties, and that nostalgia had nothing to do with the fresh and vital music. The septet is led by drummer Patrick Soluri and features Alphonso Horne (trumpet), either Jake Handelman or Josh Holcomb (trombone), Linus Myrsch (tenor, clarinet), Luther Allison (piano on six selections), Justin Poindexter (guitar), and either Ian Hutchison or Brandi Disterheft (bass). On *Live from Somewhere Nowhere*, the group performs 17 songs, nine featuring vocals by the excellent singer Hannah Gill, who has developed her own winning style. Two numbers have vocals by Queen Esther, and three others feature band members. In addition, tap dancer DeWitt Fleming Jr. is showcased on “Bernie’s Tune”.

While there are only three instrumentals on the album, there is plenty of space for the horn players in individual solos, tradeoffs and frequently explosive ensembles. Their 78-minute program begins with a high-powered version of “Lester Leaps In” that could have been a set closer. Other highlights include a rambunctious “In a Mellow Tone”, a spirited “Goody Goody”, “Frim Fram Sauce”, “Is You Is or Is You Ain’t My Baby” and “When I Get Low I Get High”, plus Gill’s exuberant singing on “Them There Eyes” and “Bourbon Street Parade”, which has infectious parade rhythms.

The Hot Toddies Jazz Band audibly prove to be a fun act to see live, and *Live from Somewhere Nowhere* gives a strong sampling of the group’s spirited music and cues listeners where they should be on Wednesdays in NYC.

For more info visit prohibitionproductions.com. The Hot Toddies Jazz Band are at Somewhere Nowhere Wednesdays. See Calendar.



***Fasten Up*
Yellowjackets (Mack Avenue)
by Brian Charette**

Famed fusion group, Yellowjackets, has been together for almost a half-century, releasing many groundbreaking albums and winning multiple GRAMMY awards. *Fasten Up* (their seventh album for Mack Avenue) demonstrates they haven’t lost a step.

Album opener is Ben Tucker’s classic, “Comin’ Home Baby”, which gets a slick arrangement by saxophonist

Bob Mintzer. Founding member, keyboardist Russell Ferrante lays down hip chords in the intro with a few choice substitutions. Drummer Will Kennedy’s beat is simple, in the pocket, and a perfect canvas for the bluesy melody, delivered with mono synth and Mintzer’s spot-on tone. Ferrante solos with idiomatic riffs and smart, funky bebop lines. The title track, by bassist Dane Alderson, has a busy bass line with Ferrante comping deftly in the cracks, allowing the angular melody to fit in the spaces of the groove perfectly. On the bridge, there’s a great Fender Rhodes section Ferrante blows sparsely over, plus an interlude with tricky offbeat hits that gives the rock-solid Kennedy a chance to open up. Accompanied by melodic cues from the band, there is a stunning showcase for a virtuosic Alderson solo, while on “The Truth of You” (a gorgeous ballad that is introduced by Ferrante’s thoughtful piano playing), the bassist contributes sensitive, supporting lines. Ferrante’s touch on piano reveals an interesting way of how he voices chords, revealing the probable influence of the great Boston pedagogue, the late Mick Goodrick.

“The Lion” is a feel good bossa with an airy melody sung beautifully by guitarist Raul Midón. The solos from all the members are smart and controlled. A subtle string pad sneaks in as Ferrante switches to piano with Kennedy catching his triplets as they smoothly transition back to the melody. “Broken”, a medium up swing number, spotlights funkster Kennedy’s super, swinging ride cymbal technique as Ferrante plays like a classic bebopper. An unusual selection, “Xemeris”, offers a rock beat as the multiphonic synth undulates, while the spare melody unfolds. More atmospheric synths in the breakdown give way to the keyboardist’s Rhodes chords that bolster the melody with crunchy second intervals. Mintzer blows double time as the groove solidifies, surrounded perfectly by Ferrante’s rhythmic shapes.

The arrangements and performances on *Fasten Up* are tight and not overproduced, making the album a great addition to the band’s extensive catalog. It’s refreshing to hear a seasoned group such as the Yellowjackets continue to develop.

For more info visit mackavenue.com. The album release concert is at Birdland Sep. 9-13. See Calendar.



***Server Farm*
Jon Irabagon (Irabbagast)
Someone to Someone
PlainsPeak (Irabbagast)
by Ken Waxman**

Although both are titled with sibilants, saxophonist Jon Irabagon’s accomplished recent discs couldn’t be more different. Irabagon, who leads his own groups and worked with, among others, drummer Barry Altschul and trumpeter Dave Douglas, composed the tunes for two distinct ensembles: *Server Farm*, his electro-acoustic adaption with the tentet’s horns and drums matched with electric guitars, electronic keyboards and laptop programming; and *Someone to Someone*, credited to PlainsPeak, a *billet doux* to the saxophonist’s hometown of Chicago, with his Windy City quartet: Russ Johnson (trumpet), Clark Sommers (bass) and Dana Hall (drums).

Irabagon, who plays tenor and soprano saxophones on *Server Farm*, doesn’t let the plug-ins overwhelm the program. This farm harvests sounds that are surging and swinging, harmonized and contrapuntal. That means triplets from the highest range of Peter Evans’ trumpet, Mazz Swift’s spiccato violin and horn riffs are upfront as often as the flanges

and frails from the guitars of Miles Okazaki and Wendy Eisenberg. Two of the strongest tracks, “Routers” and “Graceful Exit” are introduced with acute acoustic interludes. The second is shaped by looming arco strokes from bassist Michael Formanek, atop wave form jiggles and slick portamento brass. Meanwhile “Routers” contrasts Levy Lorenzo’s graduated gong echoes from the Philippine kulintang with bluesy honks and slurs from the saxophonist. These stop-time variations also contrast foghorn-like vamps and string clips with gong resonance on top. Ironically Lorenzo’s vibraphone slaps not only animate the session, but his electronics’ programmed static intensify the amplified sheen created by the guitarists, electric bassist Chris Lightcap’s pulsations and Matt Mitchell’s throbs from two different keyboards. The off-center and threatening oscillations set up by “Graceful Exit” are resolved in the final “Spy” as Swift’s doomy voice mutters half-heard dystopic lyrics into a near cacophony of brass whines, smeared reed doits and an electric bass groove that keeps the sequence horizontal.

Moving westwards to the Second City, *Someone to Someone’s* tracks are as celebratory as the other disc’s are ominous. Mostly bouncy and lyrical, propelled by bass string ambulation and drum rebounds, half-valve brass squeezes and gargling reed ripples maintain the mood as the saxophonist lauds Chi-town’s garlic pizzas, tart liqueur and transportation among other standards. The looseness is expressed in Irabagon’s switch to alto, which produces boiling freebop as well as hocketing scoops and harsh reed bites. He may bend and choke notes on “At What a Price Garlic” in tandem with Johnson’s brass squirts and smears, but staccato screeches finally loosen up the unvarying string pulse to recap the theme. With boiling reed lines and trumpet advances that boomerang from brassy snarls to plunger smears and portamento continuum, the saxophonist has found a sympathetic partner, whether outlining a blues march (“Buggin’ the Bug”) or mournful reflections (“Tiny Miracles”). The bassist provides a steadying force and the drummer’s rhythmic adaptability is saluted on “The Pulseman”.

Irabagon has a supportive situation in the Midwest. Judging from invention exhibited on these discs, let’s see if in the future he adapts a New York minute to Central Standard Time.

For more info visit jonirabagon.bandcamp.com. Irabagon is at *The Stone at The New School* Sep. 12 (with Brian Marsella). See Calendar.



High Standards
Billy Lester Trio (Ultra Sound)
by Rachel Smith

On *High Standards*, the highly improvisational pianist Billy Lester reminds the listener why standards are just that: great works that also offer an invitation for reinvention. Eight of the nine selections are songbook classics, among some of the most familiar in jazz. Lester finds and executes fresh approaches in each case, mostly through upbeat and uptempo interpretations, showcasing his light, almost bouncy pianistic touch. The piano trio’s primary focus is on its leader, with Marcello Testa (bass) and Nicola Stranieri (drums) playing in a more traditional support capacity. Even with the pianist clearly being in the spotlight, though, what makes Lester’s style so successful is the strong sense of cohesive

rhythm between the three musicians. That said, there’s a one-size-fits-all approach to much of this release, with a similar artistic and creative thread noticeable in many selections, particularly ballads, which may remove the experience of emotional depth for some listeners. The interpretation risks of performing a ballad without a longing tone may just give the impression that Lester can only play upbeat. That notion, however, is dispelled in the album’s sole original, “Free Improvisation”, in which he demonstrates a capacity for versatile and high-fly playing.

While Lester’s overall interpretive skill of tempi might have its drawbacks, he proves to be a masterful arranger, arguably his greatest strength. With his veteran, Lennie Tristano- and Sal Mosca-inspired improvisational chops, he uses creative ideas to incorporate unexpected notes into each piece, transforming them and making for a more aurally interesting dynamic while still allowing us as listeners to follow the progression through his undeniable melodic integrity. The pianist’s creativity is especially effective on “Somebody Loves Me”, “I’ll Remember April” and “You Go to My Head”, all demonstrating a strong sense of balanced rhythm and tunefulness. These pieces read like an ode to the piano itself—a testament to how enjoyable the piano is to play and in turn, how delightful to hear. On “Lover, Come Back to Me”, another album highlight, Lester taps into the instrument’s low register to add some spots of darkness. The tune serves as a perfect segue into the closer, his own “Free Improvisation”, the shining star of this recording and a clear statement of his own philosophy of playing. In contrast to the standards, this tune has a more mysterious and challenging edge for those expecting familiarity from the tried-and-true. Lester makes use of the entire range of the piano and his exploration of the instrument’s extremes is poignant: there is an almost tangible tension and resolution in what emerges as the most emotionally powerful selection on *High Standards*. It is, quite possibly, the piece that ultimately will stick with listeners the longest.

For more info visit ultrasoundrecords.it. Lester is at *Soapbox Gallery* Sep. 27. See Calendar.



About Ghosts
Mary Halvorson (Nonesuch)
by John Sharpe

On *About Ghosts*, guitarist-composer Mary Halvorson expands her longstanding Amaryllis ensemble into a horn-rich octet. For five of the eight tracks, she adds either Immanuel Wilkins (alto) or Brian Settles (tenor), or both, to the returning pair of Adam O’Farrill (trumpet) and Jacob Garchik (trombone), plus the familiar engine room of Patricia Brennan (vibraphone), Nick Dunston (bass) and Tomas Fujiwara (drums). The results are as intricately layered as they are restlessly inventive, affirming Halvorson’s entry into the ranks of the foremost orchestrators in contemporary jazz. The extra firepower up front affords Halvorson an even broader canvas for interlocking themes and counter-themes, textural juxtapositions, luxuriant voicings and just plain devilment. Throughout, her savvy writing blurs traditional divisions between soloist and support, melody and meter. Though the rhythm section often percolates just beneath the ensemble’s surface turbulence, notwithstanding occasional breaks into

prominence, its integration with the horns is seamless, coursing through each arrangement with structural intent and kinetic subtlety.

A worthy successor to *Amaryllis* (2022) and *Cloudward* (2024), this latest outing deepens Halvorson’s exploration of mid-sized ensemble architecture. Rather than necessarily foregrounding solos, she deploys each voice with compositional acumen. “Full of Neon” opens the album with a slinky martial groove, sharpened by Garchik’s garrulous trombone and Settles’ ricocheting astringent tenor. “Carved From” ensues with a looser, sunnier disposition, a *capella* horns setting a vibrant stage for the leader’s effects-driven motifs and Wilkins’ light-footed alto sinuosity. While most cuts reflect the bustle of modern life, Halvorson shows on the title track that she knows how to make a melody take root, with lush Ellingtonian harmonies cushioning her delicately chiming guitar. Among other standout moments are Brennan’s vibraphone contributions, glimmering and somberly cavorting on “Eventidal” following consolatory brass exchanges, and “Amaranthine”, which pivots between stuttering punctuation and Caribbean sway, providing a graceful pedestal for O’Farrill’s finely etched trumpet playing.

Curiously, some pieces conclude abruptly, as though withdrawing the instant they resolve their internal logic. If the brevity leaves the listener wanting more, it may be by design. Regardless, the guitarist offers not just another strong addition to her discography, but further evidence of her command over a musical language that continues to evolve.

For more info visit nonesuch.com. The album release concert is at *Solar Myth* (Philadelphia, PA) Sep. 20 and *Roulette* Sep. 21. See Calendar and 100 Miles Out.

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