

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.

The International Society of
Jazz Arrangers & Composers Presents

The ISJAC Honors Celebration & Fundraiser

An all-star evening to celebrate ISJAC's
Hall of Fame Inductees

Tuesday, September 30th - 7:00
Dizzy's Club
★ VIP Afterparty to follow ★

Featuring
JOHN BEASLEY'S MONK'ESTRA





Visit
ISJAC.ORG
for tickets