



Sam Rivers 100

Mark Masters Ensemble (featuring Billy Harper) (Capri)
by Ken Waxman

Mark Masters' masterful arrangements of Sam Rivers music for a 13-piece band are both expansive and reductive. They're expansive since California-based Masters has created big band charts for pieces that were originally recorded by quartets. Yet the sounds are reductive because all the material dates from 1965-67, a tiny slice of the career of Rivers, who was born this month in 1923 (a hundred years before this date was recorded) and whose professional career lasted from the mid '40s until his death in 2011, working with notables from T-Bone Walker to Miles Davis and Cecil Taylor.

Having helmed similar projects based on the compositions of Clifford Brown, Duke Ellington and others, Masters here is helped by collecting a group of topnotch section players and soloists. You can best appreciate his skill expressing varied moods by focusing on a trio of tunes slotted midway through the disc. "Point of Many Returns" is a bright march whose aleatory set up prevents it from slipping into stage band innocuousness, with Nicole McCabe's alto saxophone's harsh vibrations in constant counterpoint to Dave Woodley's pressurized trombone plunger tones. The piece is completed by Billy Harper's tenor tongue-slapping expression as the arrangement speeds up at the end, driven by heraldic trumpeting. "Beatrice" is a love ballad with guts (written for Rivers' wife)—with Chris Colangelo's double bass thumps steadying the pace and the choir of three trumpeters and three trombonists inserting radiant grace notes among the matched exposition from Harper's storytelling flattement and baritone saxophonist Tom Luer's thickening burbling breaths. Built around piercing unison extensions from the other horns, "Downstairs Blues Upstairs" is a romping shuffle, with brassy smears, bright squeaks and rippling triplets consistently responding to the tenor saxophonist's note-bending honks and snorts.

Masters deserves kudos for how his polished arrangements create a new variation of tunes composed for a smaller ensemble and how by celebrating Rivers' compositions he extends the jazz canon, which too often has bands stuck recreating real book standards by more famous players. But with the wealth of talent available, extending the playing past mainstream affiliations would have honored Rivers' musical inventions even more.

For more info visit caprirecords.com



Without Further Ado, Vol. 1

Christian McBride Big Band (Mack Avenue)
by Pierre Giroux

Christian McBride, the ever-versatile bassist, continues to redefine the big band idiom with *Without Further Ado, Vol. 1*, a triumph of ensemble power, jazz lineage and crossover daring. The 17-piece orchestra, a juggernaut of swing and soulful precision, roars across this album with

the controlled ferocity of a band that knows its mission: groove with purpose, swing like tomorrow is cancelled and bring every note to life.

From the opening salvo of "Murder by Numbers", the album states its bold ambitions. Sting and Andy Summers reunite with palpable chemistry, revisiting The Police's shadowy classic now layered with rich jazz orchestration. It's a blend of past and present—rock minimalism now elevated by big band maximalism. "Back In Love Again [sic]" is a funk celebration with Jeffrey Osborne strutting through the track as if he never left the charts. McBride's band is in fifth gear—tight, sassy and full of bounce. There is a dramatic vocal shift as multiple GRAMMY-winner Samara Joy delivers a hauntingly elegant "Old Folks", her vocal poise and interpretive depth surpassing her years. The band's support is lush yet restrained, complementing her interpretation. José James dives into Bobby Timmons' "Moanin'" with smoky grit and gospel inflections, guiding the band into a simmering call-and-response groove. Cécile McLorin Salvant races through "All Through the Night" with breathtaking agility, twisting the song into a vibrant tapestry of rhythm and invention. Dianne Reeves' rendition of "Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow" transforms The Shirelles' pop classic into a jazz torch song filled with heartbreaking vulnerability. Reeves' phrasing is both relaxed and urgent, with soprano saxophonist Steve Wilson delivering a solo that is tasteful and heartfelt. Antoinette Henry's performance on "Come Rain or Come Shine" is another standout, her gospel-inspired delivery bringing life to the Arlen-Mercer standard. Album closer is the McBride original, "Op.49 - Cold Chicken Suite, 3rd Movement" and highlights his dedication to advancing the big band tradition. Tenor saxophonist Ron Blake energizes the track, piercing through dense ensemble sections with a powerful tone and bebop edge. This movement, full of rhythmic complexity and clever humor, demonstrates that the bandleader's mastery of the form is both respectful and rebellious.

Christian McBride once again proves that the big band is not only alive but a vital forum of musical conversation. This release soars, swings, and seduces—often in the same breath.

For more info visit mackavenue.com. McBride is at Blue Note Sep. 2-7 (in duo with Brad Mehldau). See Calendar.



Many Rivers

Lauren Scales, Mike Flanagan, Chris Grasso
(Truth Revolution Recording Collective)
by Wif Stenger

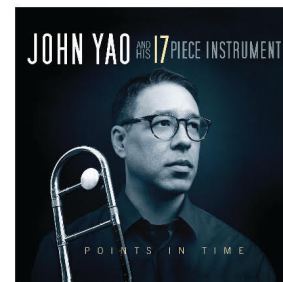
Lester Young and Billie Holiday set the standard for saxophone-vocal symbiosis, something that seems all too rare these days. Detroit/New York singer Lauren Scales and Provincetown saxophonist Mike Flanagan reach that goal in this trio rounded out by pianist Chris Grasso, who never comes off as a third wheel. The three have additional solid support from Luques Curtis (bass) and Charles Haynes and Richie Barshay (drums) on *Many Rivers*, which marks the vocalist's debut outing.

While Pres and Lady Day supported each other with alternating moments in the spotlight, Flanagan and Scales often entwine their instruments in close duets. And while Scales doesn't sound anything like Holiday—think somewhere between Erykah Badu and Nancy Wilson—she delivers a warm, unpretentious version of a tune from Holiday's songbook, "But Beautiful", with Grasso building on Bill Evans' approach to the song. Scales' playful take on "You Know Who (I Mean You)" has hints of Annie Ross and Ernestine Anderson. An augmented band featuring

guest trombonist Steve Davis negotiates the convoluted bop hooks and solos effortlessly without raising a sweat.

There's more bebop with a mostly instrumental take on the Charlie Parker warhorse "Star Eyes". Flanagan's saxophone playing sounds a bit slick and smooth-jazzy on the theme but builds up some real heat towards the end, while Scales adds brief vocalese bits between strong, melodic turns from the rhythm section. These musicians sound comfortable and relaxed together, without taking it *too* easy. There are a couple of uncommon covers: the agile opening "Spanish Joint" by D'Angelo and the Jimmy Cliff title track—making the case for each to enter the jazz songbook (as did keyboardist Larry Goldings' 1997 vision of the latter). This version is stirring and

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