

BALANCE POINT ACOUSTICS

BALANCED COMMITMENT

BY STUART BROOMER

Every independent record label devoted to marginal music represents a special commitment to an artistic vision. Few such projects, however, have the scale of Damon Smith's commitment: his embrace includes multiple forms of free jazz and improvised music along with a simultaneous allegiance to contemporary visual arts and poetry, as well as a certain added emphasis on his own instrument, the string bass. Smith founded Balance Point Acoustics (BPA) in 2001. In the years since, he has released 60+ recordings while moving from Oakland to Houston to Boston to St. Louis. The label's Bandcamp site is one in which an intrepid listener might wander for days.

Several elements distinguish the label. There's the focus on free jazz and improvised music, but there are also extended compositions. Almost any recording will have words and images affixed, but the emphasis at BPA is special. The recent *spi-raling horn* has Marilyn Crispell (piano) joining the working trio of Jason Stein

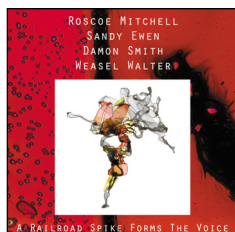
(bass clarinet), Adam Shead (drums) and Smith. It features cover art by the late, famed American painter-sculptor Cy Twombly, whose work helped inspire the collaboration, and a previously unpublished poem by Nathaniel Mackey. Smith's commitment to voice is further evident in *A Radio of the Body* with poet K. Curtis Lyle's reading accompanied by the vocal improvisations of Jaap Blonk and an instrumental trio.

There are few American labels with comparable ties to European free improvisation, noteworthy from BPA's inception. Smith himself is also a regular presence as a musician, but that, too, is a positive. He's an exceptional bassist with strong ties to the artists he records. His earliest recordings grew from the immediate impact of interacting with a series of senior bass greats: Peter Kowald, Bertram Turetzky and Joëlle Léandre. Whatever Smith's intentions, recording sessions turned into duets. The label's roots have been sustained to the present. Initially released as single CDs in the label's early years, they have since been reissued in 2021 as a three-CD set entitled *Bass Duos 2000-2007*. Another key BPA building block, already apparent in the presence of Kowald and Léandre, is a profound regard for the innovative work of European improvisers, including recordings that even predate the label. Smith's expansive vision, open to challenging art across a spectrum of music, visual arts and literature, is also aware of geography, early on forming a conduit to European improvising modes as well as American.

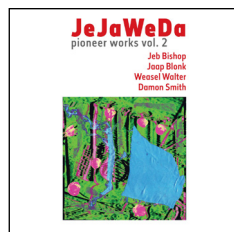
Before founding BPA, Smith had already begun to record sessions. One early example is *The Sale of Tickets for Money Was Abolished*. Recorded in 2000 and first issued a year later, it still sounds as fresh now as it did at the turn of the century, with Smith as part of a trio with English bass saxophonist Tony Bevan and Scott R. Looney playing prepared piano and electronics. The track titles such as "An Adverse Drawing Might Mean Mutilation" are taken from Jorge Luis Borges' fantasy short story, *The Lottery in Babylon*; the cover is a vibrant painting by California abstract expressionist Tom Schults. Heard today, its interactivity remains state of the art, the gravity of Bevan's instrument still a revelation.

Other masterpieces further reveal the profound absorption and adaptation of European free improvisation. *Sextessence*, recorded in 1999 by guitarist Henry Kaiser's Sextet (including Smith) and subtitled *A Tribute to John Stevens and the Spontaneous Music Ensemble*, is particularly explicit, referencing SME's masterwork *Quintessence*. A 25th anniversary tribute to that SME title, Kaiser's sextet literally updates the homage, including in its personnel UK saxophonist John Butcher, who was a member of SME's later editions. Not untypical of BPA releases, the liner note is a poem, in this case an homage to Stevens by Kent Carter, the American émigré bassist who played on the

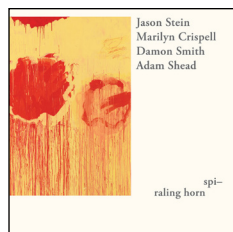
(CONTINUED ON PAGE 31)



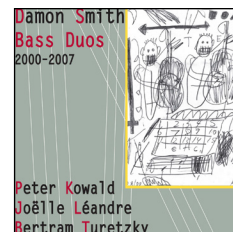
A Railroad Spike Forms The Voice
Roscoe Mitchell/Sandy Ewen/
Damon Smith/Weasel Walter



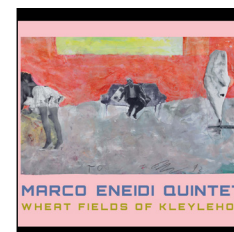
JeJaWeDa: Pioneer Works Vol. 2
Jeb Bishop/Jaap Blonk/Weasel
Walter/Damon Smith



spi-raling horn
Jason Stein/Marilyn Crispell/
Damon Smith/Adam Shead



Bass Duos (2000-2007)
Damon Smith



Wheat Fields of Kleylehof
Marco Eneidi Quintet

VOXNEWS

WHEN OCTOBER COMES

BY TESSA SOUTER

The month of October through time holds significant events in Black civil rights history, including the Supreme Court decision in 1883 striking down the Civil Rights Act of 1875 (thus re-legitimizing racial segregation); Nat King Cole becoming the first Black performer to host his own TV show (1956); Martin Luther King Jr. being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize (1964) and the founding of the Black Panther Party (1966), among many other events. Two civil rights-related concerts at Dizzy's Club this month are right on track.

First, GRAMMY-winner Adonis Rose and the New Orleans Jazz Orchestra, in collaboration with the renowned Cleo Parker Robinson Dance Company, present *Sacred Spaces*—a ballet blending music and dance that was inspired by the burning of three historic Black churches in Louisiana, featuring award-winning composer-vocalist **Andromeda Turre** (Oct. 16-19). Then, as part of the Ertegun Jazz Hall of Fame inductions at Dizzy's Club, pianist and composer Marc Cary unites with rising-star vocalist **Ekep Nkwelle** in what promises to be a stirring tribute (Oct. 21) to Cary's former boss, **Abbey Lincoln**, the significant voice of jazz and the Civil

Rights era, who used her music and songs to advocate for racial justice. Let's hope an album is in the works. It would certainly be timely. Over at Rose Theater, **Celia Cruz: A Centennial Celebration** (Oct. 17-18) honors the legendary Cuban "Queen of Salsa" with an all-star band led by Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra bassist Carlos Henríquez, who played with Cruz in his youth. Guest vocalists will include **Aymée Nuviola**, **Alain Pérez** and **Ariacne Trujillo Duran**.

ON THE RECORD... France-born, NYC-based jazz vocalist **Laura Anglade** celebrates the release of her fabulous new standards album *Get Out of Town* (Nettwerk Music Group/Justin Time), bringing her beautiful, clean sound to Zinc Bar (Oct. 21). The album features thrilling arrangements of standards including "April in Paris", "I Wanna Be Loved" and "This Can't Be Love". Winner of the 2023 Prix Opus for Concert of the Year, Anglade has opened for Melody Gardot and Gregory Porter and is definitely one to watch. **Stella Cole** presents her new release, *It's Magic* (Decca), over two nights at Sony Hall (Oct. 2-3). Expect vintage love songs backed by lush strings (arranged by GRAMMY-winning Alan Broadbent) and straight up standards. MacArthur Fellow and three-time GRAMMY-winning singer and composer, **Cécile McLorin Salvant's** new album *Oh Snap!* (Nonesuch) features 12 short, intimate songs, which she wrote as part of a creative quest: to place the same spontaneity and joy with which she draws and paints into her music. Initially never intending for them to be released, the songs experiment with digital tools and effects Salvant had never used before: GarageBand, Logic, AutoTune, Midi plugins, drum loops, vocal effects, reverb and filters—

reflecting her wide-ranging musical influences from her childhood in Miami: boy bands, grunge, classical, folk, etc. The result is everything you love about this daring, ambitious and riveting artist.

SEE YOU THERE... **Champion Fulton** will be all over the city, most notably with her co-led nonet with Klas Lindquist at Birdland weekly (Oct. 5, 12, 19, 26). The Gaia Wilmer Large Ensemble celebrates the iconic music of **Gilberto Gil** at Dizzy's Club with the profoundly moving, award-winning Brazilian vocalist **Mônica Salmaso** (Oct. 9-12). The emotionally resonant and always authentic **Vicki Burns** will celebrate Halloween Eve with her show *Haunted Heart* at The Green Room 42 (Oct. 30). **Andrea Wolper** and William Parker perform in duo at First Street Green (Oct. 5). **Curtis Stigers** is at City Winery (Oct. 12). **Gabrielle Stravelli** appears as featured guest of Michael Kanan's quartet at The Django (Oct. 12). The amazing **Carolyn Leonhart** sings as part of pianist Mike LeDonne's birthday celebration at Dizzy's Club (Oct. 26). **Jamie Leonhart** appears at Joe's Pub (Oct. 25). Ella Fitzgerald Jazz Vocal Competition winner, vocalist and songwriter **April Varner** appears at Zinc Bar (Oct. 13), celebrating her album *April by April Varner* (Cellar Music), a lovely collection of standards and originals around the theme of April. Also at Zinc Bar: **Sasha Dobson** (Oct. 29). At Pangea, check out **Alexis Cole** (Oct. 8), **Amy London** celebrating her birthday (Oct. 15), **Anne Phillips** (Oct. 22) and **Judy Niemack** (Oct. 27). **Sara Serpa** will be at Bar Bayeux (Oct. 17). **Alma Micic's** album release show (featuring saxophonist Eric Alexander) is at the Riverdale Jazz Series at An Beal Bocht Cafe (Oct. 29).

(JAZZ EM AGOSTO CONTINUED FROM PAGE 12)

without embellishments, his rendition of “Journey in Satchidananda” was rich with ornaments evoking the atmosphere of her original, the instinctive and elastic handling of dynamics reminiscent of a traditional blues player. From “Pithecanthropus Erectus” (Mingus) to “Serenade to a Cuckoo” (Rahsaan Roland Kirk), each composition was chosen for a reason, whether for a melodic line that sounded pleasing or a blueprint for Parish to sculpt and expand upon as he saw fit.

For the power trio **Thumbscrew**, bassist Michael Formanek appeared focused on the scores. The compositions were split between group members, yet the sound was cohesive and belonged to the three musicians: Formanek, Mary Halvorson (guitar) and Tomas Fujiwara (drums). Their collective ethos was to push the music ever forward, with contempt for routine, hence the set’s interpretation of the same material as played in Hamburg last November felt markedly different. Fujiwara switched between drums and vibraphone, and Halvorson’s pedal-launched loops and soundwarps added an extra layer of challenge for listeners to grasp already and unusually organized shapes. Each new piece proved equally surprising, no small feat for a jazz trio.

Oozing more energy than a Tesla, Vera Cruz, Mexico-born vibraphonist **Patricia Brennan** led a septet featuring the same line-up as heard on the lauded *Breaking Stretch* album, with the exception of drummer Dan Weiss and percussionist Keisel Jimenez. The leader’s drive and her jubilant arrangements were hard to resist and the players proved solid gold: the percussion-heavy music, at times veering into even a danceable Latin jazz, instinctually followed the leader’s mallets, which doubled as conductor’s batons. The horns played unisons, entwined lines and solos on top of hot rhythm workouts, including Mark Shim, who on tenor channeled the ghost of Joe Henderson.

The Portuguese delegation included **Luís Vicente**’s trio, a homegrown band for the trumpeter after years of touring and recording with the likes of William Parker, Luke Stewart, John Dikeman and others. The trio was previously heard at the neighboring Causa Efeito festival with Tony Malaby as their guest. Here, the spirit of free music torch-bearer Don Cherry was an obvious point of reference, with Vicente alternating between elusive flurries and assertive, longer lines, Gonçalo Almeida (bass) and Pedro Melo Alves (drums) propelling each selection.

UK turntablist **Mariam Rezaei** is a frequent solo performer, and her set found her alone on stage for half an hour before being joined by MOPCUT’s guitarist Julien Desprez (a regular presence at the festival, with his own projects and in orchestras led by Rob Mazurek, Nate Wooley and Mats Gustafsson) and drummer Lukas König. Rezaei’s gear and deep jazz culture allowed her to tap into a well of near-infinite possibilities. Desprez unleashed sonic blasts and electric uppercuts; Rezaei’s decks and records were a key to triggering computer-stored sound sources, including Mette Rasmussen’s saxophone and Gabriele Mitelli’s trumpet, mixed in a fictional dialogue. When her French and Austrian cohorts joined, the noise factor increased.

In his fourth successive year at the festival, pianist **Pat Thomas** was part of yet another meaningful and uncompromising project: the X-Ray Hex Tet, which performed in the dimly-lit grand hall, benefiting from superlative sound. Attendees were treated to a somber, harrowing experience from hushed emissions and silence to [Ahmed] bandmate, alto saxophonist Seymour Wright’s spewing of telegraphic notes. Added were two drummers, a celesta (bell-piano) player and spoken word artist Edward George, the latter who read texts and set off samples related to the consciousness-raising subject matter, including academic responsibility in the validation and perpetuation of mistreatments based on racial prejudice: slavery, phrenology, hangings,

colonization. The speaker’s voice was neutral, the facts dreadful enough without need for overstatement. The set didn’t draw rapturous applause, but rather left the audience stunned. A bold programming choice no doubt, the present-day implications giving listeners food for thought.

For more info visit gulbenkian.pt/jazzemagosto/en

(LABEL SPOTLIGHT CONTINUED FROM PAGE 11)

original *Quintessence*. Kaiser’s group sounds like itself, the method integrating the listening and playing gifts of the group’s members, but it also achieves the ideally abstracted continuity and unity of Stevens’ methods. That intimacy with global improvising methodologies is evidenced in a later Smith-Kaiser collaboration, *East Cape Yupik*, a quartet recording from 2015 in which the cover art looks like a map of part of California with segments named for a broad variety of improvising methodologies, band names (e.g. AMM) and labels (e.g. FMP). It’s a perspective rare even in American free jazz circles, but the music is all by Americans, a brilliant collective expression of Smith, Kaiser, Steve Parker (trombone) and Chris Cogburn (drums).

Long associations include one with percussionist Jerome Bryerton, who makes up the duo Gleaming Shard with guitarist Da Wei Wang, the two who double on the recent *Mirrors in Light Diamonds* as visual artists: Wei Wang providing the overlaid photo on the front cover; Bryerton the abstract painting in the gatefold. The music is drone-based, deeply involving, with Wei Wang using multiple guitars to build complex drones, complemented by Bryerton’s massed cymbals, gongs and bowed metal, the two musicians creating ecstatic fields of reverberant metal and feedback. *A Railroad Spike Forms the Voice* is one of the label’s masterworks. Recorded in 2014 and released in 2021, it’s a single 72-minute collective improvisation, as densely woven as an Isfahan carpet, with Roscoe Mitchell’s acerbic, oboe-like soprano etching a coiling vision amidst the unpredictable abstractions that Sandy Ewen pulls from her lap-held electric guitar and the shifting contributions of Smith and drummer Weasel Walter.

The late alto saxophonist Marco Eneidi’s *The Wheatfields of Kleylehof* is a six-part suite recorded over 20 years ago with a band of younger musicians. It’s a profound reminder of Eneidi’s special force, his lines scalding, emotionally wrenching, and contorted or conversely murmuring, heard here in an elegiac composition enriched by the subtly-detailed, restrained contributions of trumpeter Darren Johnston, the late guitarist John Finkbeiner, drummer Vijay Anderson and Smith. It’s the latest BPA release, and is another BPA masterpiece of free jazz composition.

For more info visit balancepointacoustics.bandcamp.com. BPA artists performing this month include Wendy Eisenberg at The Stone at The New School Oct. 10 and Roulette Oct. 29, Sandy Ewen at The Record Shop Oct. 21 and Jason Stein at Roulette Oct. 29. See Calendar.

(SIENA JAZZ CONTINUED FROM PAGE 12)

would again. An exception was **Norma Winstone** and pianist **Kit Downes**, a working duo with a five-year history. They played in Piazza Provenzano, in front of a basilica erected in 1595. Most of their set consisted of tunes by Downes with lyrics by Winstone, from which the two launched complex spontaneous piano/voice counterpoint. Winstone has been known for her wordless vocals over her 55+ year career, but she writes sophisticated lyrics with rhymes that sound natural. Her words to Jimmy Rowles’ “The Peacocks”, that most enigmatic of tunes, added their own poetry to Rowles’ mystery. When the duo performed a

standard with its own set lyrics, such as “I Fall in Love Too Easily”, the elasticity of the song lines seemed entirely new.

The other performances by teachers took place in a bastion of Fortezza Medicea. **Marquis Hill**, **Lage Lund**, bassist **Gabriele Evangelista** and drummer **JK Kim** were an auspicious combination. Lund can bathe any ballad in warm, lyrical intelligence. On “Darn That Dream”, his presence seemed to turn Hill’s instinctive aggression into rapt introspection. The quintet of tenor saxophonist **Francesco Bearzatti**, guitarist **Reinier Baas**, Downes, Evangelista and Kim played astute modern international jazz. Vocalist **Camilla Battaglia** appeared with the world-class rhythm section of bassist **Thomas Morgan** and drummer-pianist **John Hollenbeck**. If Winstone is a vocalist who sings past words, Battaglia is a singer whose crystalline soprano operates in the vastness of pure abstraction. In this spare trio setting, it was even more possible than usual to hear what an extraordinary talent is Morgan.

There can be genuine benefits to ad hoc ensembles. The Workshops provided an opportunity to experience **Miguel Zenón** liberated from his customary responsibilities as leader of his own ambitious ethnic projects. In Siena, Zenón was free to jam. The quintet contained trumpeter **Alex Sipiagin**, pianist **Aaron Parks**, bassist Morgan and drummer **Jeff Ballard**. When Zenón cuts loose and blows, he can play insanely fast and still sound silken. He makes you think of Sonny Rollins: his touch on alto is lighter but he shares with Rollins a deep affinity for theme-and-variation. His ideas flow with a similar sense of endlessness. It was mostly not an occasion for ballads, but Horace Silver’s “Peace” felt right for the night. Morgan led it out and set a pensive mood that the other members of the band all pursued, in turn.

Each teacher at the Jazz Workshops taught two instrument classes and two ensemble classes. On the last two nights of this last week, each ensemble gave a recital, with teachers participating. Siena is famous for its historical division into 17 “contrada,” or districts. The recitals took place on two stages in Contrada della Tartuca. On a warm Italian summer night, it was a lovely place to listen to music. Excellent pasta was available for five euros, and while it was still light, you could look out for miles over the green rolling hills of Tuscany. The strength of the Siena Jazz Workshops was apparent in the quality of the music that was played in the recitals. Each ensemble was enhanced by the presence of the teacher—by the fact that Ballard was on drums, for example, or that Lund took the guitar solos. But so many students played so well that it gave you faith in the future of the jazz art form.

For more info visit: sienajazz.it/international-summer-workshop-2025

