

JERSIKA

JAZZIN' THE BALTICS

BY KEN WAXMAN

A music lover, a vinyl purist and a Latvian nationalist, Mareks Ameriks combines all his passions in Riga-based Jersika Records, which since 2017 has released 37 sessions, 25 in its analog series and 12 digital, with seven available as reel-to-reel tapes. “It started because I was able to build my own studio with two professional vintage studio tape recorders,” recalls Ameriks, the label’s founder and producer. “Then it was clear to me that we needed to record music for real. And it was clear that it should be a jazz label. So I started approaching local musicians and encouraged them to record their own albums in an analog way. It started locally but I would like to go internationally.”

Latvia (located between Estonia to its north and Lithuania to its south) celebrates Proclamation Day this month, commemorating the nation’s 1918 independence from the Russian Empire, and Jersika, whose slogan is “Baltic Jazz Since 2017,” concentrates

on music recorded and released in the area. As Ameriks puts it: “Every particular place impacts your creativity, your state of mind, thoughts, approach to things. And we can hear it on records.” The Latvian jazz scene now finds locals playing with those from other countries and Jersika reflects this dynamic. One album features Riga saxophonist Karlis Auzins’ Double Trio with an international line-up, and upcoming is one featuring Lithuanian reedist Liudas Mockūnas (whose past international collaborators range from saxophonists Mats Gustafsson and Evan Parker and guitarist Marc Ducret, to pianists Jacob Anderskov and Agustí Fernández, bassist Barry Guy and drummers Stefan Pasborg, Vladimir Tarasov and William Hooker, among others). “You could say there is an intense collaboration going on between Jersika and me,” notes Vilnius-based Mockūnas, who says material exists for two more albums. “They care about their releases: distribution, reviews, YouTube, good sound engineer and usually nice choices of recording places. Also I like the idea of a regional record label, which is serious and has a common taste as mine. You can’t send them a ready recording. They’re not interested in music recorded somewhere else by somebody else.” As

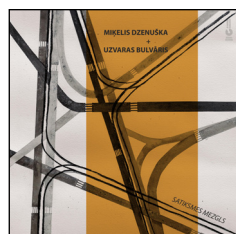
Ameriks says, “Today Jersika could release artists from any place, but the recordings should be made here.” Riga-based Auzins, who has three albums on the label confirms that “Jersika is dedicated to documenting and releasing jazz and other music from Latvia and the Baltics, thus painting a picture of the scene in the region, which I find very important.”

The label name references the Jersika castle, centre of ancient Latgalians, part of the Latvian nation. It also reflects Riga’s Jersika street, near where Ameriks lives and where he organizes a yearly vinyl day event. “Jersika is easy to pronounce,” he notes. Although Latvians have played jazz since the ’30s, little was documented on disc, although by the ’60s Latvian Radio regularly recorded the music. Since Ameriks tries for a complete view of his country’s jazz, besides recording contemporary music, Jersika additionally has a historical series of archived radio material. Initially the label was financed with his own money, but now the Latvian State Cultural Foundation provides support, which coupled with sales, keeps Jersika solvent. Occasionally musicians contribute as

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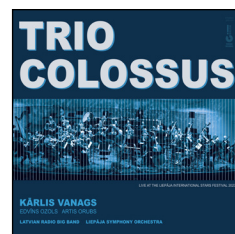
Still Nature
Kārlis Auzins/Rihards Plešņans



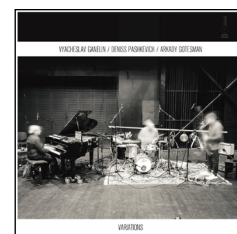
Satiksmes Mezglis
Mīkēlis Dzenuska/Uzvaras Bulvāris



Live at the Tbilisi Jazz Festival 1978
2R+2B



Trio Colossus
Kārlis Vanags



Variations
Ganelin/Pashkevich/Gotesman

VOXNEWS

FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION

BY TESSA SOUTER

For contemporary artists, November is the month when GRAMMY voters are actively listening and finalizing nominations, and everyone’s inbox is overflowing with “For Your Consideration” requests. Amid the frenzy, it’s worth remembering that with only five jazz vocalists selected for Best Jazz Vocal Album, many outstanding artists will inevitably be overlooked. But those who aren’t NARAS (National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences) members are just as important—and can vote for their favorite musicians by streaming their music, buying their albums and hearing them live. And, speaking of live music, there is no better place to hear jazz than NYC and arguably no better month than November to hear it—not too cold (yet) and bursting with performances.

This month also brings the finals of the Sarah Vaughan International Jazz Vocal Competition. Congratulations to the 2025 finalists—**Diamond Franklin** (Philadelphia, PA), **Candace Jones** (Hollywood, FL), **Katie Kortum** (New York, NY), **Julia Moscardini** (Buenos Aires, Argentina) and **Emma Smith** (London, UK)—who will compete for the “Sassy Award” at a special concert at NJPAC (Nov. 23). Hosted by WBGO’s Gary Walker, this year’s event features an as per usual all-star judging panel: Christian McBride, **Ann Hampton Callaway**, Jon Faddis, **Nnenna Freelon** and **Janis Siegel**, plus a special performance from 2023 First Prize winner, **Tyreek McDole**, whose debut album

Open Up Your Senses (Artwork, 2025) came in at #1 in the Jazzweek charts and stayed there for five weeks straight.

ON THE RECORD...Nine-time GRAMMY-nominated jazz vocalist **Tierney Sutton** has long had a singular gift for expressing lyrics, but she didn’t consider writing her own until she and her band were invited to score Clint Eastwood’s 2016 film *Sully*. That experience opened the floodgates to another creative side, which she further explored on *Good People* (JRL-SGS, 2024), her well-received collaboration with LA funk band San Gabriel 7, for which she wrote eight of the lyrics. Her new album, *Talking to the Sun: Tierney Sutton meets Charlier/Sourisse* (Gemini), released digitally in August and physically this month, marks another inspired partnership—this time with the award-winning Paris-based jazz duo of drummer André Charlier and pianist-organist Benoît Sourisse and featuring her long-time musical partner, guitarist Serge Merlaud. Admirers of her work on *Sully*, Charlier/Sourisse invited her to lead a workshop at their school in France, which led to a tour and, ultimately, to the recording, for which Sutton wrote stunning new lyrics to five Charlier/Sourisse compositions and three Brazilian pieces. From LA to Paris via Brazil, the resulting album is a luminously beautiful cross-cultural marvel.

Produced by drummer Ulysses Owens, Jr., who first heard the vocalist via his 2012 tribute album, *Hello Earth! The Music of Kate Bush* (Winter & Winter), **Theo Bleckmann**’s beautiful new release, *Love and Anger* (Sunnyside), offers a set of songs by a diverse range of artists, including **Kate Bush**, The Beatles, **Nina Simone** and Bleckmann’s mentor and friend, the late **Sheila Jordan**. Bleckmann will be performing her song “The Crossing” at Dizzy’s Club (Nov. 5), as part of a special celebration of her life in advance of her memorial (see below).

SEE YOU THERE...Jazz vocalist **Sheila Jordan**’s Memorial will be held at Saint Peter’s Church (Nov. 18). Get there early to grab a seat and check out this issue’s

In Memoriam Special Feature (pgs. 14-15). Jordan was, hands down, one of the most beloved singers of the past 30+ years.

Birdland has a dazzling November lineup: singer-songwriter **Paloma Dineli Chesky** (Nov. 21), whose jazz debut album, *Memory* (Audiophile Society), a mix of originals, standards and Brazilian gems, looks set to put her on the fast track to stardom; vintage jazz revivalists, the Hot Sardines, fronted by the witty and super-talented **Elizabeth Bougerol** (Nov. 2-8); multi-GRAMMY-winning Brazilian singer-pianist **Eliane Elias** (Nov. 18-22)—also at the William Paterson University Shea Center Jazz Room (Nov. 23); vocalist-trumpeter **Benny Benack III** (Nov. 16), celebrating the release of *This is the Life* (bbjazziii); and Canadian singer, arranger, producer and Juno-Award-winner **Emilie-Claire Barlow** (Nov. 7-9). Over at the Zinc Bar, catch **Johnny O’Neal** (Nov. 12) and **Tyreek McDole** (Nov. 28). At Mezzrow, highlights include **Gabrielle Stravelli** (Nov. 2); **Mary Foster Conklin** (Nov. 16), whose smoky-voiced, tough-cookie exterior belies a beautiful, sensitive soul and Italian chanteuse **Chiara Izzi** (Nov. 30). Other top picks include **Rachael & Vilray** at NJPAC (Nov. 16) and The Town Hall (Nov. 18) celebrating their new album *West of Broadway* (Concord); **Michele Lordi** at Bar Bayeux (Nov. 26); the GRAMMY Award-winning Neo-Sufi vocalist **Arooj Aftab** is at the Blue Note (Nov. 20-23) and **Bettye LaVette** and **Cyril Neville** at Sony Hall (Nov. 2). **Christie Dashiell** is at Caramoor (Nov. 7). The Tri-Centric Vocal Ensemble (**Adam Matlock**, **Anne Rhodes**, **Kyoko Kitamura**) returns to Roulette for two nights for the first time since 2019, including a participatory workshop delving into Anthony Braxton’s various musical systems (Nov. 4) and a performance of the groundbreaking Syntactical Ghost Trance Music (Nov. 5).

*Tessa Souter is at Dizzy’s Club Nov. 12. See Calendar.

(INTERVIEW CONTINUED FROM PAGE 6)

the decision for us to really exploit this thing that we had discovered rather than going back to playing standards, which is what we were doing before. I was like, “I’m going to bring my drone stuff from now on and we can get into that.”

TNYCJR: So when improvising with the ETA IVtet, do you have a framework for the compositions in advance, or do you just sort of start jamming?

PARKER: We just start, we just kind of go! We never talk about it.

TNYCJR: So to get results like you’ve been getting, you obviously have to have real chemistry.

PARKER: Yeah, we’ve played almost every Monday at the ETA for seven years. And really for the first five of it at least, we were just playing standards. But then maybe the last two or three years that we played the club, we were just improvising.

TNYCJR: How were you affected by the closure of the ETA (Dec. 2023)?

PARKER: Oh man, I was super bummed. It was kind of like my home in L.A. I didn’t really play anywhere in the city except ETA. Especially after the band started to get more popular, I would get asked to play in different places. I’d say no, if you want to hear me play around town, you have to go to ETA on Mondays. And when it closed, they only gave us two or three weeks’ notice, so we didn’t even really have a chance to try and fight to keep it open.

TNYCJR: You’ve done countless session recordings. How does your preparation for session recordings compare to the preparations you do for your leader recordings? Do you just kind of give yourself over to the session leader’s vision, or do you expect to have input in the recording given your stature as a musician?

PARKER: It’s a little bit of both. I’m being asked because at this point people know what I do, and how I approach my sound, and they’re asking me to come and do that in their music. And often times, they’re not giving me a lot of direction. Sometimes the session work involves preparation where you might have to rehearse somebody’s music that might be difficult. With my own music, I’m kind of the same way with the people who I ask to play with me.

TNYCJR: You’re playing the Durations Festival at Brooklyn’s Public Records in November. When preparing for a festival slot, do you take the theme or the context of the festival into account?

PARKER: I just prepare for it, you know, for what I’m doing. I’m playing solo for the Durations Festival. I assume they ask me to do it because they know what I do. So I’m just going to go—and do what I do.

TNYCJR: Can you talk about your usage of electronic instrumentation in your music and how electronics and technology help you create your art?

PARKER: I’m an electric guitar player, so I’m very much in the world of electronics, where I embrace using certain technological aspects; that’s a very big part of my processing. And a lot of that has come from my experience being in Tortoise, the way that group makes music—it’s almost, for lack of a better word, electroacoustic. It’s traversing analog and digital worlds, where you’re using electronics or digital music platforms to compose music that contains analog sounds, but using the digital realm to organize music.

TNYCJR: On the topic of Tortoise, when you joined the band, they were already in existence. Can you talk about what it was like to join an established band and the related challenges?

PARKER: I was a fan of Tortoise before I was even in the band. We were all friends and part of a larger music community. When I heard their music, I thought it was really unique and was really struck by what they were doing and their sound. And when they asked me to play with them, I was pretty conscious not to disrupt what they were doing. I was trying not to intrude, but rather enhance what they were doing musically.

TNYCJR: You have new music with Tortoise coming out for the first time in almost a decade and the group comes to NYC this month for three nights at Bowery Ballroom. What was it like rejoining the band and revisiting what is arguably your most well-known project?

PARKER: We hadn’t gotten together in a while, but we enjoy each other’s company and that’s always inspiring. And it was good. We just kind of pick up where we left off.

TNYCJR: You’ve accomplished so much, and just based on your output from even this past year, you show no signs of slowing down. What do you hope to accomplish as you continue to progress as an artist, and what goals do you make for yourself?

PARKER: I just want to keep growing. I want to keep finding situations that I can learn from, and add to my musical experiences. I’m really fortunate to be able to do these great kind of things.

For more info visit jeffparkersounds.com. Parker plays solo at Public Records Nov. 9 (part of Durations Festival) and is at Bowery Ballroom Nov. 14-16 (with Tortoise). See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Tortoise—*TNT* (Thrill Jockey, 1997)
- Chicago Underground Trio—*Flamethrower* (Delmark, 2000)
- Jeff Parker—*The Relatives* (Thrill Jockey, 2004)
- Scott Amendola Trio—*Lift* (Sazi, 2009-10)
- Jeff Parker, Eric Revis, Nasheet Waits—*Eastside Romp* (RogueArt, 2016)
- Jeff Parker—*Forfolks* (International Anthem-Nonesuch, 2021)

(LABEL SPOTLIGHT CONTINUED FROM PAGE 11)

well, “What I always do is to pay for photos, video and design and give 10% free copies as royalties,” he explains.

Another Jersika impetus is its hands-on approach. Auzine notes that he’s “released on other labels, but the uniqueness of Jersika is its openness towards my ideas. They take care of all the practicalities, thus allowing me to focus on music only, which is very rare these days. Then there’s the flexibility and the quality of their work.” Mockūnas agrees: “They want to be a part of the process from the very beginning to the end.” In a world of streaming, why only release LPs or tapes? “For me vinyl is king,” admits Ameriks. “I think the invention of vinyl is in some way similar to the piano. Today you can play synths and imitation piano even on your phone but the real piano stays. Today we can listen to music everywhere and vinyl will never be the mainstream format again. But when it’s time to listen for real, I choose vinyl. The human factor is so big in vinyl production. When it’s done well it sounds different and takes more of your attention. I have nothing against CDs but I think they are the first step to streaming. Why should I

listen to a CD if I can do it with hi-res digital files? If there would be a serious distribution offer for CD releases though, I would adapt my catalogue.” Adds Mockūnas: “Of course releasing a vinyl album is special. The artwork looks much nicer, the sound is also specific, not necessarily better sometimes. But you have to accept it. I also like their philosophy of sound. It’s usually analog recordings—just like in the old days.” Adds Ameriks: “The emphasis on vinyl is very logical, especially in the Baltics, because the CD market is not really here anymore, which is different than in Germany for example. There’s also a certain hype about vinyl.”

Jersika’s reel-to-reel sets are an expensive option, costing about 450 euros (around \$530) each, but as Ameriks explains “there are people in the audiophile community who want to hear all-analogue recordings: the first copy from the master tape.” In the opposite vein, all Jersika releases are available on streaming platforms and digital versions can be purchased, although Ameriks notes those sales contribute little to the label’s bottom line. One area in which Ameriks would like to expand is into film and video. The label has a YouTube channel that offers album teasers, chronicles, conversations, concert videos, broadcasts and documentaries. “We’ve already made three documentaries and it would be great to continue,” he says. Since Ameriks aims to promote Latvian jazz internationally, no artist has a Jersika-exclusive contract. “For me it’s absolutely OK that artists release their music themselves or on other labels,” he says. “Actually I will be very glad if a release on Jersika helps an artist make a deal and sign with some bigger and legendary label someday!”

For more info visit jersikarecords.com

Tomoko Omura Roots Quintet
Joined by Noah MacNeil and Diana Huey (pre-recorded)



Multimedia Concert
with Live Visual Projections and Narration of an original story

RUN, RUN, RUN

Album Release Concert
Nov 9th Sun. 2PM

The Cell Theatre
338 W 23rd, NYC
with: Jeff Miles (guitar), Glenn Zaleski (piano), Pablo Menares (bass), Jay Sawyer (drums), Noah MacNeil (illustrations & projection)
Supported by The Howard Gilman Foundation via Chamber Music America



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**Run
Run
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TOMOKO OMURA

Release via Outside In Music on Nov 14th