

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

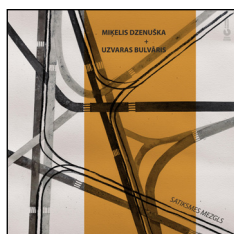
Ameriks says, “Today Jersika could release artists from any place, but the recordings should be made here.” Riga-based Auzins, who has three albums on the label confirms that “Jersika is dedicated to documenting and releasing jazz and other music from Latvia and the Baltics, thus painting a picture of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

The label name references the Jersika castle, centre of ancient Latgians, 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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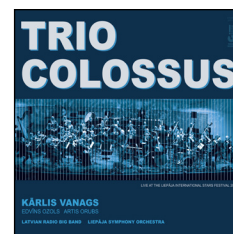
Still Nature
Kārlis Auzins/Rihards Plešņans



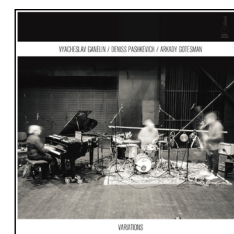
Satiksmes Mezglis
Mīkēlis Dzenuska/Uzvaras Bulvāris



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.