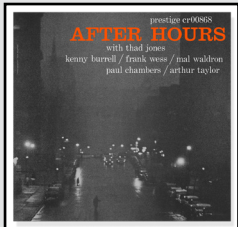


DROP THE NEEDLE



After Hours

Thad Jones, Frank Wess, Kenny Burrell,
Mal Waldron, Paul Chambers, Art Taylor
(Prestige-Craft Recordings)

Candy Girl

Mal Waldron (Calumet-Strut)

by Andrew Schinder

With the celebration of piano legend Mal Waldron’s centennial this year, it’s appropriate to examine the catalog of a master (who passed away in 2002, 23 years ago this month at age 77). His somewhat enigmatic body of work oftentimes keeps him just outside the pantheon of truly iconic figures, though these two LP reissues showcase the pianist’s prowess and in two contradictory styles, in two different eras of his career.

Originally released in 1957, *After Hours* (recently reissued on 180g vinyl) has Waldron contributing to an all-star sextet led by trumpeter

Thad Jones and featuring Frank Wess (flute, tenor), Kenny Burrell (guitar), Paul Chambers (bass) and Art Taylor (drums). The pianist was at a creative peak during this period, releasing a string of classic albums as a leader and working as a consistent member of groups led by Charles Mingus and Jackie McLean, as well as serving as Billie Holiday’s last accompanist. Despite his distinctive pianism, this session is not a prime example of his playing skill per se. Rather, the album finds him in workhorse mode: he composed all four tracks and, with a few notable exceptions, largely cedes the spotlight to his bandmates. Guitarist Burrell, in particular, is glorious, and gives this session its unique quality among so many horn-driven post-bop recordings. In addition, Wess’ giddy flute on opener “Steamin’ is full of blissful energy, and Jones provides a clinic on the bluesy “Blue Jelly” and the swinging banger “Count One”. Nevertheless, Waldron generally still gives himself a consistent, fundamental foundation to the compositions, which generously allows his groupmates to take off.

In 1963, Waldron famously suffered the dual misfortunes of a nervous breakdown and heroin overdose, following which he relocated to Europe, leaving the temptations of New York. There, he began to expand his playing style, largely losing the

structure that defined his ’50s output (while retaining his famous angularity), and becoming freer and more progressive. In 1975, he found himself playing with the seminal Afrobeat/funk outfit The Lafayette Afro Rock Band and the result, *Candy Girl* (lost until 2016) is finally receiving a full-fledged reissue. This album is basically the opposite of the classic, swinging post-bop *After Hours*. It is dank, funky and dirty. Good golly, *Candy Girl* slaps! Waldron here shows none of the control or discipline he demonstrated on the other album. He owns the electric piano here and displays exhilarating chemistry with the Lafayettes. The lead riff on opener “Home Again” is instantly intoxicating and never lets up (the reissue includes a bonus version of the song that, in a welcome addition, is twice as long at over 10 minutes). The group even manages to take the groove up a notch with the next selection, “Red Match Box”, which features the masterful rhythm section of Lafayette Hudson (bass) and Donny Donable (drums). With the title track, Waldron mellows out a bit, delivering a stunning soul jazz performance that hints at his struggles with, and ultimate conquering of, his demons.

For more info visit craftrecordings.com and strut-records.co.uk



Unseparate

Webber/Morris Big Band (Out Of Your Head)

by Bill Meyer

Unseparate is the second album that the Webber/Morris Big Band has made in its ten-year existence. That may not seem a lot, but when you consider the cost of getting nineteen people together, and the fact that the band’s lifespan encompasses COVID-19 pandemic time when you could not have so many people blowing horns and breathing air in the same room, the miracle is that it exists at all. That achievement is made all the more remarkable when you consider that the band plays challenging original material composed by its two leaders, a pair of Canadian ex-patriate saxophonists and composers who are explicitly committed to doing something new in a format whose heyday passed three quarters of a century ago.

One challenge to the form is Anna Webber’s interest in just intonation (JI), a tuning system based on whole numbers that can result in sounds that are gloriously resonant, but that often lures practitioners into making music that showcases the system’s psycho-acoustic effects. Webber is no more interested in conforming to JI rules than big band ones. The four-part “Just Intonation Etudes for Big Band”, a COVID-19 era creation that kicks off this album, begins with a richly-textured armada of long tones that feels like a friendly introduction of one system to another. Pleasantries accomplished, the suite proceeds through passages of strident, staccato rhythms and breath-paced sound-bursts, all spiked with expressive solo turns that grow organically out of the rich orchestrations. Fans of both JI and big

band music will find themselves on fascinatingly unfamiliar ground throughout.

Angela Morris’ compositions may not traffic in alternate tunings, but they’re just as rewardingly challenging. “Habitual” uses some familiar big band sonorities to usher the listener into a sequence of linked sonic scenarios—a winding piano foray, flutes lightly raining on a sinuous baritone sax line (Lisa Parrott), a jagged but locked-in stack of rhythms (Yuhan Su-vibraphone, Marta Sánchez-piano, Adam Hopkins-bass, Jeff Davis-drums)—so contrasting that they seem to mock the piece’s name. “Mist/Missed” likewise uses passages of growling, sliding percussive textures, intricately efflorescent woodwind charts (including Charlotte Greve, Jay Rattman, Adam Schneit and Parrott), starkly rocking brass (trumpeters Jake Henry, Kenny Warren, Nolan Tsang and Ryan Easter; trombonists Zekkereya El-magharbel, Jen Baker, Tim Vaughn, Reginald Chapman) and drum exchanges to suggest a sequence of changing states without resorting to programmatic convention.

Diverse and endlessly imaginative in its deployment of familiar tools to new ends, *Unseparate* is a deeply rewarding accomplishment.

For more info visit outofyourheadrecords.com. The album release concert is at *Roulette* Dec. 18. See Calendar.



Reflection Of Another Self

Milena Casado (Candid)

by Sophia Valera Heinecke

A stunning debut from trumpeter, flugelhornist and composer Milena Casado, *Reflection Of Another Self*

is easy in its confidence, as the leader amplifies the difficulties and triumphs of showing compassion, knowing oneself and holding boundaries. Searching, perplexing piano lines, shoulder to shoulder with Casado’s energizing trumpet, offer a unified sensibility created by a core band comprising Lex Kortén (piano), Kanoa Mendenhall (bass) and Jongkuk Kim (drums).

Vocals orient us towards the importance of change, repeating the word, asking “who am I?” Casado’s trumpet playing is, at times, beautifully breathy and human, and across the album, melodic lines are assigned to surprising guest players including Brandee Younger (harp), Nicole Mitchell (flute), Kris Davis (piano) and Meshell Ndegeocello (bass). Flute, electronic wind instrument (EWI) and trumpet all have moments when they hold resonant melody and duet in unison with vocalizations. “Yet I Can See” brings with it a smoothness but doesn’t fall into easy listening tropes; it escalates to an almost carnivalesque place and exemplifies the expert balance this album strikes. Always pleasing but never complacent, there is a parallel moment with escalating piano phrases and spoken word samples on “Resilience”, contrasted by a gorgeous solo from the leader, de-escalating into quiet affirmations.

Across the album, Morgan Guerin (EWI) and sound artist Val Jeanty give polyvocality to technology, speaking to the feeling of this time. The electronics do not overcomplicate but rather bring us into awareness of the dialogue between the present and future; samples using the human voice add embellishment. The orchestration and musical inclinations across the album brim with organic flow, answering the urgency of present day with compositions that feel both personal and universal. Though it may not be improvised, what flows underneath feels like a deep knowing and trust in the unknown and what has already been articulated. Standout features blend beautifully, particularly between Younger and Mitchell on “Lidia y Los Libros” and Ndegeocello closing the album with “Self Love”.

Reflections Of Another Self is beautifully informed by the ecosystem cultivated by Casado’s peers, the

movement between many sonic vocabularies uniquely mapping her world. The trumpeter’s becoming is bolstered by talented collaborators, contributions by essentially two full bands, a community that champions her with this leader debut. It is not just the detail that invites repeat listens, but the strength and care that pulses throughout.

For more info visit candidrecords.shop.musictoday.com. Casado is at *Close Up* Dec. 5 (as leader) and *Threes Brewing* Dec. 7 (with Jonathan Reisin). See Calendar.



Live At The Village Vanguard

Bill Stewart (Criss Cross)

by Jeff Cebulski

After his stint as John Scofield’s drummer in the ’90s, Bill Stewart gained a following for his energetic, cymbal-driven style and for being a unique composer among drummers. Following two highly-regarded Blue Note albums (his sophomore and junior sessions as leader) in the mid ’90s, Stewart has often recorded as part of a trio, notably with organist Larry Goldings and pianist Kevin Hays or guitarist Peter Bernstein. In 2018, the drummer formed a new group and self-released *Band Menu*, with bassist Larry Grenadier (a longtime associate who has additionally served as a stalwart trio rhythm partner for the likes of Chris Potter, Mark Turner, Pat Metheny and Paul Motian) and saxophonist Walter Smith III (who has been closely aligned with trumpeter Ambrose Akinmusire as well as his own ensembles since his leader debut 20 years ago). Now this trio has reappeared in Stewart’s latest, *Live At The Village Vanguard*, taken from a 2023 appearance at the historic venue and featuring re-vamped music from Stewart’s catalog, plus a few new compositions and one offering from Smith.

The group’s synchronicity, evident on their earlier album, continues here, as the leader lives out a personal dream, having spent time sitting near other famous drummers during concerts at the Vanguard. His partners shine in response. Smith likes to operate in the upper register of his tenor, serving well on modal ballads such as “Purple Veil”, where his flowing and halting cadences and Grenadier’s walking lines—sometimes in tandem with Smith, sometimes with Stewart—are undergirded by the drummer’s restless counterpoint. The iterated compositions shine. The drum and bass intro to “Mynah” is almost the same as on *Telepathy* (Stewart’s second album for Blue Note, a quintet which also included Grenadier), while Smith entails the main melodic line with understated poise that becomes more animated as time goes. The drummer’s cymbal sheen leads the modal “Space Acres” (originally from Stewart’s Blue Note debut album *Snide Remarks*). Here he embarks on a drum solo with splashes, as Smith provides a spacy commentary before Grenadier enters to turn it into an interstellar blues. The more conventional blues “How Long Is Jazz?” (from Stewart’s 2005 *Keynote Speakers* trio album with Goldings and Hays) gets a reconstruction that features a strong Grenadier solo over Stewart’s masterfully subtle swing underneath. The driving “7.5” (which appears on Chris Potter’s *Wish* album, also recorded at the Vanguard) is matched by Smith’s nimble delivery, and much to the delight of the crowd.

The *esprit de corps* and positive audience reception captured throughout this recording hopefully bodes well for a return of this harmonious trio.

For more info visit crisscrossjazz.com. Stewart and Walter Smith III are at *Smoke* Dec. 10-14 (part of “Countdown 2026 Coltrane Festival”). See Calendar.



Sounds the Color of Grounds

Three-Layer Cake (Otherly Love)

by John Pietaro

Three-Layer Cake might be lauded a supergroup but for the DIY core of the trio constantly refuting industry hoopla. In 2021, this writer referred to the band as “downtown prophecy come to fruition, fulfilling the promise of that moment in time when punk aesthetics painted raw experimentalism and free jazz liberation.” Presently, Mike Watt (bass), Mike Pride (drums, percussion) and Brandon Seabrook (guitar, banjo) are in full power mode. Where Three-Layer Cake’s debut was simply visionary, *Sounds the Color of Grounds* moves the trio well beyond its members’ singular influences to cast a band in every sense of the word.

Kicking off the album, “Deliverdance” is a racing hayride into heretofore unknown regions, a blurring feature for Seabrook’s B&D Silver Bell tenor banjo, flat-picked. (Please note: this is a no-frailing zone, criss-crossing concepts of tradition, possibly tonality itself, over a two-step.) With Watt’s throbbing, sliding bass and Pride’s tireless backbeat, the opener braves the ground of the more stressful moments of the 1972 film *Deliverance*, set to both an imagined square dance and Seabrook’s work with Anthony Braxton, Bill Laswell, Gerald Cleaver, Marco Cappelli and Jessica Lurie, among other avant royalty. But just as soon as the ear becomes comforted within one pseudo-genre comes the free “From Couplets to Corpuscles” with Seabrook on reverb-sweeping electric guitar, fueled by a rhythm section attack conjuring Ornette Coleman’s Prince Street days. Pride’s perpetual-motion wire brushes scream at Watt, whose bassline amounts to a series of snarky fills reminiscent of his best work with post-Minutemen band FIREHOSE.

“The Hasta Cloth” takes us into the nastiest of jazz fusions, with fuzz guitar over multi-layered drum and bass tracks (Pride’s dumbek wonderfully crowds his drumset), and “What Was Cut from the Negative Space” conjures anything composed by Angelo Badalamenti for David Lynch, juxtaposed with painfully distorted guitar (in the best imaginable way), shifts of meter and tonality, and seemingly digitally-treated marimba. Sonically speaking, the electro acoustic “Occluded Ostracized and Onanistic” will capture the listener, its nighttime crazy-house ride through old Downtown pastiched with Pat Metheny’s “Bright Size Life”. Yep. And in addition to the considerable instrumental prowess of each musician, the delightfully grinding spoken word by Watt keeps attention on the moment; listen to the beckoning “The Lonely Sail”.

Jazzbos, let Three-Layer Cake in. And welcome the vampiric wounds you’ll learn to love.

For more info visit otherlylove.net. Brandon Seabrook is at *Close Up* Dec. 1 (with Ingrid Laubrock) and *Bar Lunático* Dec. 13. See Calendar.

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