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Modesty of the Magic Thing
Zeena Parkins (Tzadik)

Scree

Chris Brown, Ben Davis, Zeena Parkins,
William Winant (Relative Pitch)

Redshifts

Zeena Parkins/Cecilia Lopez (Relative Pitch)
by Kurt Gottschalk

During Zeena Parkins' time at Mills College—she was a professor and Darius Milhaud chair in composition there for more than a decade before a merger with Northeastern University upended the music department—the composer, improviser and eclectic harpist was actively a part of a vibrant creative community. Three notable connections from her Bay Area tenure were the visual artist Jay DeFeo, percussionist William Winant and the tubophone, an instrument designed by composer Lou Harrison that she came upon in Winant's studio.

Those forces—art, instrument and two musicians—come together in Parkins' *Modesty of the Magic Thing*, a truly wonderful recording of a set of compositions inspired by a series of DeFeo's drawings titled "The Seven Pillars of Wisdom." Parkins connected the tubophone to her harp, creating a metallic, resonant extension of her instrument heard throughout her eleven short compositions on the album. For his part, Winant's rig features an array of bells (including microtuned and just-tuned bells), cymbals and gongs. There is, in other words, a lot of metal in the mix, but it's a thoughtful and much of the time a lovely, gentle album. Even without the drawings, there's a strong thematic link holding the suite together, like a chorus of chimes that's gained collective consciousness.

Parkins and Winant joined forces with another former Mills instructor, keyboardist-electronicist Chris Brown and cellist Ben Davis (an instructor at Crowden School in nearby Berkeley) to record a pair of sessions at Mills College Concert Hall in 2023. As (presumably, at least) an improv meeting, *Scree* is a wider ranging and sometimes less focused set than *Modesty*, but there are moments of pure quartet groupthink. After a brief and rather heavy opener, with scraped strings and pounding rhythms, the quartet sets about charting a series of eight evocative abstractions across rich terrains with titles evoking unspecified places ("Meridian", "Remains", even the title track, describing loose stones on a hill or a mountain). Group restraint allows the eight tracks to create a feeling of shared discoveries.

Parkins connected with a younger member of her original community for *Redshifts*, a duo with Cecilia Lopez (recorded at Roulette in Brooklyn in January). Lopez—a New Yorker by way of Buenos Aires—is heard on RED, a sculptural electronic instrument of Parkins own devise that also gives the album its title and the cover its hue. RED is a large, hanging, feedback generator, a motion-sensitive, handwoven net of speaker wire with Lopez processing the sounds it sends in real time. Parkins employs a good bit of electronic augmentation to her electric harp as well, making the album sound something like a trio: two electronic sources (sometimes but not always distinct) and the separate timbre of struck and plucked strings. The electronics sometimes seem a little overexcited, squelching and squawking away, but there's an unusual beauty to the vibrations and pulsations, an appealing, agitated, electrified ambience to their shifting red sounds.

Zeena Parkins has been advancing the possibilities of the harp for some 40 years now and 2025 has seen several new entries into her discography—including

another title coming this month featuring new works for solo harp by former Mills instructors and also from Relative Pitch, who have been avidly backing her work. The harp has come into vogue in recent years in jazz and experimental realms, but Parkins remains in a league of her own.

For more info visit relativepitchrecords.com and tzadik.com. Parkins is at The Stone at The New School Dec. 5 and Paula Cooper Gallery Dec. 11 (both with William Winant). She is also at The Stone at The New School Dec. 13 (with Ikue Mori). See Calendar.



Smoke Shifter

Chad Taylor Quintet (Otherly Love)
by Mike Shanley

For his sixth album as a leader, drummer Chad Taylor convenes a group with Jonathan Finlayson (trumpet) and three professional acquaintances he met while working in Philadelphia—Victor Vieira-Branco (vibraphone), Bryan Rogers (tenor) and Matt Engle (bass). Everyone, save Finlayson, brings compositions to the session, giving the quintet a unified sound wherein lines that differentiate individual solos disappear, improvisation and composition get equal time and even time signatures seem to reshape with ease.

The sound of Vieira-Branco blending with trumpet and tenor evokes the Blue Note Records' late '60s post-bop period, though not in any derivative sense. The ostinato in the album opener "Broken Horse" (by Rogers) that Engle holds down, channels a similar determination that Bobby Hutcherson and Andrew Hill utilized and projected in many of their ensembles. Taylor works closely with Engle here and adds some strong accents that fuel solos from Rogers, Finlayson and Vieira-Branco. "Avian Shadows" (by Engle) begins with a funky beat on the rims, tenor and trumpet harmonizing closely over colorful accents from the vibraphonist. The drummer throws rhythmic curveballs to Finlayson during a bright solo, toggling between free territory and tempo, leading into Rogers' solo turn and resulting in a continuous, shifting momentum.

Taylor's two compositional contributions play in to the band's adaptability. "Waltz for Meghan" starts slowly and pensively, picking up for a strong yet understated, fluid Engle bass solo supported by the drummer. During the title track, the horns are played in counterpoint, Finlayson's short, sustained lines contrasting with Rogers' flowing solo spotlight. Vieira-Branco's three compositional contributions move in yet another direction, albeit one that still conveniently fits within, and adding to, the album's overall cohesive quality. The balladic "October 26th", with its noticeable, open space, allows the music to breathe: the horn players perform parallel lines over a foundation provided by the vibraphonist, who helps in setting the scene behind the group's frontline, while Vieira-Branco's "Paradise Lawns/October 29" is threaded together by the album's one true drum solo.

With the caliber of both writing and performance on *Smoke Shifter*, one can only hope this quintet returns to the studio to add another chapter.

For more info visit otherlylove.net. The album release concert is at The Jazz Gallery Dec. 13. See Calendar.