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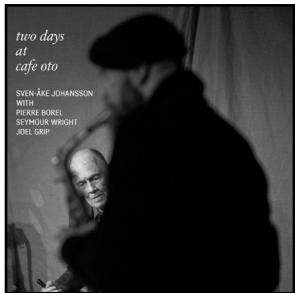


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## COME SUNDAY: THE SACRED WORKS OF DUKE ELLINGTON



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**Two Days at Café OTO**  
Sven-Åke Johansson (Otoroku)  
by John Sharpe

Even though recorded at age 82, a little over a year before his Jun. 15 death last year, *Two Days at Café OTO* captures the Swedish, Berlin-based drummer **Sven-Åke Johansson (1943-2025)** in undiminished exploratory form. A pivotal presence in European free improvisation since the '60s, Johansson is known not only for his work with Peter Brötzmann—most notably on *For Adolphe Sax* and *Machine Gun*—but also for his wide-ranging conceptual projects, from “Concert for 12 Tractors” to “MM schäumend: Overture for 15 Handheld Fire Extinguishers”. But none of these works disguise the fact of Johansson’s highly-attuned sensibilities for improvised music, heard throughout this double-album documenting a short residency at the titular venue. Two of the most adventurous contemporary alto saxophonists, Pierre Borel (Die Hochstapler, Umlaut Big Band) and Seymour Wright (لچم [Ahmed]), join him, along with Ahmed stalwart and co-founder of Umlaut Records, bassist Joel Grip. Across four lengthy excursions and one shorter outing, in both trio and quartet permutations, the principals develop an elastic conversational dynamic, favoring motion and inquiry over climax or closure.

Johansson’s drumming relies on pared-down rudiments—a kick-drum thump, a hi-hat zap, a brush of snare—deployed with purposeful spacing that subtly steers the ensemble. Wright specializes in pithy, textural alto exclamations, willfully abrasive and raw, while Borel traces springy lines, often trading in fragments that evoke bebop, Monk and Eric Dolphy, among others. The music’s most bracing stretches occur when both saxophonists engage in prolonged, back-and-forth invention, reshaping snippets of jazz vocabulary into wiry, kinetic exchanges, particularly on the third and fifth pieces (the pieces are simply numbered with the names of the participants appended). Grip binds the ensemble with a firm, yet flexible pulse, responding to Johansson’s minimalism with grounded, economical figures. Johansson also turns to accordion during parts of the performance, prompting some of the set’s more atmospheric moments, as on the fourth track where his cascading patterns, bowed bass and Borel’s breathy saxophone converge in a spare reverie before the music fractures again into stop-start motion. Ultimately, what emerges is less a late-career summation than a reminder that Johansson’s imagination never stopped seeking new terms for engagement.

For more info visit [otoroku.bandcamp.com](http://otoroku.bandcamp.com)



*Portrait of Sheila* (Blue Note Tone Poet)  
Sheila Jordan  
by Ken Dryden

Sheila Jordan (1928-2025) passed away last year on

Aug. 11, a few months shy of turning 97 years young. She was singing from her early youth and although she was a jazz fan, her unusual approach to singing scared off many record labels and tested club owners’ patience. Jordan was not only driven and willing to go where the music inspired her, but in that dynamic was never one to fall into predictable routines.

Her landmark debut album, *Portrait of Sheila*, has certainly stood the test of time since its 1963 release, in no small part due to Jordan’s fresh approaches, adventurous spirit, emotional delivery and courage to stick to her guns as to how she wanted to interpret the music. This recent 180g vinyl reissue—part of Blue Note’s limited, deluxe edition, Tone Poet series—restores the warmth of the original sessions in a superb Kevin Gray mastering. The session’s set list, which blends standards, then-recent compositions and jazz tunes, would eventually become classics for jazz vocalists globally. Her band—veteran Barry Galbraith (guitar), the young Steve Swallow (bass) and Denzil Best (drums)—prove sensitive to Jordan’s free-spirited singing. Her playful take of “Dat Dere” (Bobby Timmons), adding Oscar Brown Jr.’s timeless lyric, was influenced by raising her young daughter, Tracey, and features Swallow as her sole accompanist, a setting she continued to explore throughout her career. Jordan’s emotional rendition of “Willow Weep for Me” brings out the loneliness of this oft-performed chestnut.

By the end of her career, as she continued to regularly perform into 2025, Jordan was widely acknowledged as a major jazz artist, having been honored with numerous awards, plus a gargantuan following of admiring fellow vocalists and fans. Her intimate 2022 studio session, *Portrait Now*, with frequent collaborators, Roni Ben-Hur (guitar) and Harvie S (bass), is likely her recording swan song. Yet, the ravages of age seem to have had little effect. Buoyed by the bassist’s creative accompaniment, she scats up a storm in a breezy rendition of “The Touch of Your Lips”, brings out the hopefulness in “You Must Believe in Spring” and reprises the wistfulness of “Willow Weep for Me” six decades after her recording debut. Jordan doesn’t merely rely on well-known repertoire either, as she also can be heard exploring Kenny Dorham’s lesser known “Fair Weather” (featuring his lyrics). Of course, Jordan had to include one of her vocalese numbers, performing a mini-autobiography and inspired scat in “Relaxing at the Camarillo” [sic]. This relaxed date serves as the perfect finale to Sheila Jordan’s storied career.

For more info visit [dottimerecords.com](http://dottimerecords.com)



*Reflections - Facing South*  
(featuring Eddie Palmieri, Luques Curtis)  
Conrad Herwig (Savant)  
by George Kanzler

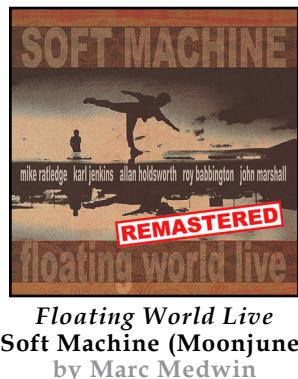
Of *Reflections - Facing South*, Conrad Herwig writes of this unique, sans percussion-instrument album: “This is basically a reflection of a lifetime of work. And there are a lot of reflections here—of jazz, of salsa, of Afro-Cuban, Afro-Caribbean, and South America.” He goes on to say that it was his idea but “Eddie [Palmieri] never does anything without playing a huge role in shaping it into something beautiful.” **Eddie Palmieri (1936-2025)**, the composer-pianist-

bandleader who passed away Aug. 6 at age 88, before this album was released, was nothing less than a titan of salsa, Afro-Caribbean music and jazz. *Reflections* (recorded in 2020) is unique in both his and Herwig's discographies, eccentrically but brilliantly creating a program of Afro-Latin jazz without any percussion instruments or trumpets. The band: just Herwig's trombone, Palmieri's piano and Luques Curtis' bass.

The unique set-up allows Palmieri to remind us that the piano, too, is a percussion instrument. He uses it to create the Afro-Caribbean rhythms usually expounded by various drums, bells and cymbals. He also riffs on the piano, as horn sections would in a salsa band, and on "C'mon (Mi Guajira)" he incorporates tombao and montuño figures usually supplied by percussion and horn sections. Throughout the album, Palmieri's comping combines jazz-style accompaniment with Afro-Latin rhythms, while the solid bottom of the beat is firmly established by Curtis' rock-solid bass playing. As a soloist, the pianist contrasts markedly with Herwig. The trombonist favors a fluid, bold, open tone and his jazz solos flow melodically. Palmieri, conversely, brings the avant-leaning jazz modernism exemplified by pianists such as Thelonious Monk, McCoy Tyner (he's cited both as influences) as well as touches of Cecil Taylor, into his solos. The Monk debt is unmistakable on the opening of "Augmented Blues", but then he retreats into Afro-Latin clavé behind Herwig's lead and solo, before he begins his solo with dissonant notes from his right hand and rolling chords from the left, all becoming disjointed before resolving back into clavé. Yet Palmieri can also match the trombonist's lyricism with his own, bringing subtlety and grace to solos on the ballads "Cuando se Habla Amor" and "Monica".

*Reflections - Facing South* was a one-off, an eccentric but triumphant reimagining of the essence of Latin jazz in a chamber jazz setting and perhaps Palmieri's final recording.

For more info visit [jazzdepot.com](http://jazzdepot.com). "The Eddie Palmieri Experience" is at Jazz at Lincoln Center Jan. 9 (part of Unity Jazz Festival). See Calendar.



Floating World Live  
Soft Machine (Moonjune)  
by Marc Medwin

Founding member of Soft Machine, English keyboardist and flute player **Mike Ratledge (1942-2025)** passed away last year on Feb. 5, at the age of 81. In 1976, he was the longest-tenured Soft and was also the final original member to have left the group. As annotator Sid Smith observes, *Floating World Live* captures Soft Machine in transformation, one moment of so many for a band always intent on metamorphosis. Yet, recorded one year prior to Ratledge's departure, this 1975 concert broadcast (now lovingly remastered by Mark Wingfield) also demonstrates an astonishing unity of purpose.

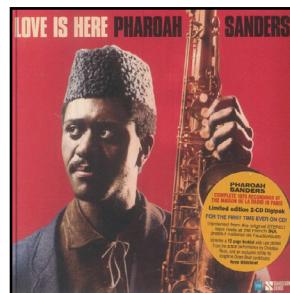
In typical Softs fashion for the period, the Bremen performance comprises a connected suite. The album opens with one of the group's most synergistic concert-captures as they "float" a breathtaking version of the titular piece. Ratledge and Karl Jenkins share keyboard duties as the music rises, spectral, capped by Alan Holdsworth's guitar sustains, John Marshall's gong invocation and sizzling cymbals,

all of which leads directly into a scorching version of "Bundles". If Holdsworth is afforded much of the solo space, including an exquisite violin contribution to "The Man Who Waved at Trains", the others are given spots that demonstrate the group's increasing sonic diversity. Roy Babbington's effected bass narrates its way through "Eaeling Comedy" and "J.S.M." at ten minutes and change gives John Marshall room to stretch out, his timbrally melodic drum kit in full effect. Ratledge crafts an astonishing synthesizer solo, building it from a few motives as he would later construct portions of his soundtrack to *Riddles of the Sphinx*.

Unlike that "minimalist" score, "North Point" uses repetition and expansion to push against tonal boundaries until all that remains are squalls of varying speed and register, though a logical progression governs the whole. Marshall joins when Ratledge's solo fades out, and the group slams into the modally-charged, felicitous riffage of "Hazard Profile". Even to posit that the album is a winning mixture of classic Softs fusion and then-current experimentalism would be to render it glib beyond reason. A testament to those now gone, especially to the late Ratledge, the concert also demonstrates just how flexible the band could be. They blurred the boundaries they originally erected, and, as always, Moonjune presents an exemplary package in glorious sonics.

This is Soft Machine at its finest and sounds like no one else.

For more info visit [moonjune.com](http://moonjune.com)



Love Is Here  
Pharoah Sanders (Transversales-Elemental Music)  
by Pierre Crépon

Drummer **Greg Bandy (1949-2025)**, perhaps best-known for his association with saxophonists Pharoah Sanders and Gary Bartz, passed away last year on May 23, a few months after turning 76. Here he appears on one of what are many albums with his former employer, Sanders. And though this release represents new old-Pharoah Sanders, it is not necessarily *brand-new*.

*Love Is Here (The Complete Paris ORTF Recordings)* is an expanded, complete edition of a 1975 French radio concert released on LP by the Transversales label in 2020 as *Live in Paris* (1975). This current, limited edition, 180g double album edition (also available as a 2-CD set), however, adds one full extra hour of music. The re-release of this material in such short order calls for attention to details. Packaging-wise, there's not too much to remark: veteran writer Kevin Whitehead's liner notes provide contextualization and quotes from the concert's pianist, Harlem native Danny Mixon, and although the cover inexplicably uses a mid '60s image of the bandleader, the booklet does include a few nice photos from the actual concert. The main thing here is therefore the music.

As Whitehead points out, the concert comes from an under-documented period in Sanders' career. The tenor saxophonist made his most impactful leader dates during his work with the Impulse! label (1966-73). It was often written, back then, that the quality of his output had starkly declined during those years. He only recorded again in 1976, taping *Pharoah* (Bandy's second-ever recording), an India

Navigation LP that achieved cult status many years later and reissued in 2023 as a boxed set by Luaka Bop. This 1975 Paris concert predates *Pharoah* as Bandy's first-ever recording with Sanders, but seems to confirm that the saxophonist had indeed hit a creative block. The original material ranges from his certified classic, the crowd-pleaser "The Creator Has a Master Plan" to "Love Is Everywhere", from his downward Impulse! period, to the title track, which he would later record with singer Phyllis Hyman for *Love Will Find A Way* (Arista), a largely decried crossover album. Several John Coltrane-related tunes are included, as is a somewhat generic vocalized blues. Length is a dominant aspect. Bassist Calvin Hill joins Mixon and Bandy and all solo extensively, while allowing the laid-back grooves and minimal vamps to stretch.

The fact that editing often was an issue for Sanders is on plain display here. Unfortunately, the overlong selections highlight the safety-net devices and gimmicks Sanders used while waiting for the right inspiration. Something is not working, and the single-disc *Transversales Disques* LP arguably makes a smoother listen. But there is a catch: the one standout from this 1975 Paris tape is the use of the radio studio's pipe organ on "The Creator Has a Master Plan". The instrument was large enough to eventually be moved to a cathedral, and it adds unexpectedly great texture to a well-known classic, including Bandy's crescendoing, rhythmic undercurrent and interplay. Attentive listening to this new edition reveals that several minutes of this highlight's ending had been deftly edited out of the *Transversales* disc. Take your pick.

For more info visit [elementalmusicrecords.bandcamp.com](http://elementalmusicrecords.bandcamp.com)

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