

Live at Smoke
Al Foster (Smoke Sessions)
 by Thomas Conrad

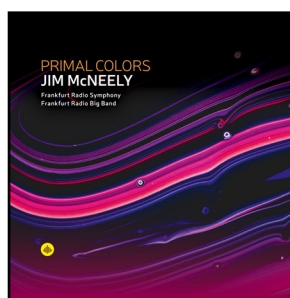
Drummer **Al Foster (1943-2025)** was money. Miles Davis knew it, as did Sonny Rollins, both with whom Foster played. Add to this pedigree, the likes of Herbie Hancock, Joe Henderson, McCoy Tyner, Cedar Walton and Kenny Barron. All hired Foster to play drums in their bands because, as Davis put it, “Al had such a groove and he would just lay it right in there.” Foster made very few records under his own name. But toward the end of his long life, his last albums were three fine recordings, all released on the Smoke Sessions label, two of which feature saxophonist Chris Potter. The most recent of these is the double-album *Live at Smoke*. It turns out to be the most valuable of the three because it is the only one recorded live in the New York club (that gives the label its name), because Brad Mehldau is on it, and because it is Foster’s swan song. The occasion was a birthday celebration for the drummer, with bassist Joe Martin rounding out the quartet. But a scant four months after it was recorded in January 2025, Foster passed away at age 82 on May 28, before the music could be released.

This album bursts with life in its nine tracks. Some

of the tunes have been familiar for decades, but the band here sounds excited to rediscover them. Wayne Shorter’s “E.S.P.” is a famously ambiguous form, with shifting harmonies, hovering melodies and few clear resolutions. Potter attacks it, transforming its mysteries into bold declarations. Rollins’ “Pent-Up House”, on the other hand, is devoid of ambiguity. It is built on ass-kicking syncopations. Potter smokes it. There are two stunning songbook ballads. Potter renders the melody of “Old Folks” in trills and passionate *a capella* cadenzas, and Mehldau reimagines that melody in sudden single-note stabs. The pianist is also riveting on “Everything Happens to Me”. It would be hard to overstate how much it elevates a band to put Potter and Mehldau in the tenor saxophone and piano chairs.

As for Foster, he is the soul of the swinging energy that lifts this music. He gives himself many solos, which are always clever, purposeful and concise. He even solos on “Old Folks”, slowing down and choosing his notes as carefully as any player of a melodic instrument. In *Live at Smoke*, Al Foster has left behind a parting gift. It will make us miss him all the more.

For more info visit smokesessionsrecords.com



Primal Colors
Jim McNeely (Challenge)
 by Ken Dryden

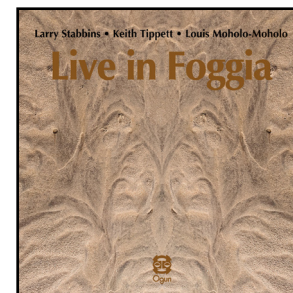
A master of many skills, **Jim McNeely (1949-2025)** was known equally as a brilliant pianist, soloist, bandleader, sideman, composer and arranger. Like valve trombonist-pianist, arranger and composer Bob Brookmeyer, some of McNeely’s best work is heard in music that he wrote for large European ensembles, several of which he conducted over decades. Aside from the Vanguard Jazz Orchestra, opportunities for McNeely to record his larger scale works in the US were limited, whereas several European orchestras had the funding and ability to record them. The suite *Primal Colors*—commissioned by German broadcaster Hessischer Rundfunk (hr)—is finally receiving its premiere release, long after it was debuted in 2007 (recorded for broadcast in 2009), with the composer conducting the Frankfurt Radio Symphony and Frankfurt Radio Big Band, as heard on this album.

This is McNeely’s long-hidden masterpiece, with nine sections and five movements connected by four interludes (all named for the colors that inspired the composer). The overall impression of the music feels as if it was created as a soundtrack for a film in the composer’s mind. “Black” especially sounds like a theme for a movie thriller, serving as an ominous introduction with its eerie strings, leading into a tense surge of brass with the punch of the rhythm section, highlighted by soprano saxophonist Hans-Dieter Sauerborn’s darting, intriguing solo. The multifaceted “Yellow” waltz showcases McNeely’s creative integration of big band and orchestra, blending lush sections with a touch of drama, spotlighting pianist Peter Reiter and flugelhornist Axel Schlosser. “Red” has an upbeat, layered structure, but with its share of musical detours, featuring an edgy solo by guitarist Martin Scales. Conveying the image of the hopes for a new day at sunrise, “Blue” spotlights tenor saxophonist Julian Argüelles. The composer’s explosive finale, “White”, is introduced by Jean Paul Höchstädter’s extended drum solo; he remains prominent throughout

the movement, leading into a whirlwind of swirling themes backing tenor saxophonist Tony Lakatos’ searing solo.

While this album is not Jim McNeely’s final recording, it adds an important chapter to the distinctive musical legacy he has left us since his Sep. 26 passing last year at the age of 76.

For more info visit challengerecords.com



Live in Foggia
Larry Stabbins, Keith Tippett, Louis Moholo-Moholo (Ogun)
 by John Sharpe

This trio of Larry Stabbins, Keith Tippett and **Louis Moholo-Moholo (1940-2025)** approaches free jazz as *freedom to call on whatever takes its fancy*, rather than *freedom from* accepted norms, be they harmony, meter or song. That was as true on the unit’s only other album, *Tern* (FMP, 1983), as it is now on *Live in Foggia*, an archival recording from a short Italian tour in 1985. As a consequence, legendary South African drummer Moholo-Moholo, and the British pair of pianist Tippett and reedman Stabbins, draw on the entirety of their long cross-curricular histories in a transcendent set.

“The Greatest Service” begins with Tippett and Stabbins outlining an aching, majestic theme, familiar from the pianist’s 1978 large ensemble magnum opus *Ark: Frames (Music for an Imaginary Film)*, before stretching into a lope where consonance and squall rub shoulders as equals. Also immediately apparent, the underpinning shimmering cymbal work affirms Moholo-Moholo’s remarkable sensitivity, something well known to collaborators as diverse as pianist Marilyn Crispell, trumpeter Wadada Leo Smith and saxophonist Evan Parker. Belying a reputation built on the indisputable power and volcanic drive that fuelled the legendary Blue Notes and the Brotherhood of Breath (both with Chris McGregor), he proves as adept at muted undercurrents and timbral provocation as surging tattoos.

Across two expansive improvisations, the trio’s responsiveness becomes its defining signature. In the ensuing volatile exchanges, Tippett seems almost willfully mercurial, as if trying out a panoply of different gambits in rapid succession for what best fits the moment. As funky riffs, folky airs, joyous South African kwela rhythms, classical flourishes and prepared piano clanking speed by, Moholo-Moholo and Stabbins variously accentuate or contrast, with the reedman’s ear for a catchy extemporized melody especially prominent. Structural echoes thread through the performance. That opening theme recurs, once instrumentally as might be expected, but also once, strikingly, as a vocal refrain hummed by Tippett, with Moholo-Moholo not refraining but offering discordant counterpoint, before Stabbins’ flute playing continues into a mysterious section of whispers and taps.

Alternately dizzying and mesmerizing, the album stands as a revealing portrait of an under-documented band operating with spontaneity, daring and purpose. It also serves as a reminder of the greatness of two improvising masters who have passed away: Keith Tippett (d. 2020) and Moholo-Moholo, who died last year on Jun. 13 at age 85.

For more info visit ogunrecording.co.uk

SHEILA JORDAN

(Nov. 18, 1928 – Aug. 11, 2025)



On Feb. 14th, jazz legend **Sheila Jordan** released *Portrait Now* on the preeminent jazz label **Dot Time Records**. The title was inspired by *Portrait of Sheila*, Jordan’s debut album for Blue Note Records (1962).

The album features Jordan on vocals, **Roni Ben-Hur** on guitar and **Harvie S** on bass. Their chemistry on this recording is undeniable.

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