



Abstraction Is Deliverance
James Brandon Lewis Quartet (Intakt)
by Jeff Cebulski

Abstraction Is Deliverance, saxophonist James Brandon Lewis’ fifth album with his well-established quartet—Aruán Ortiz (piano), Brad Jones (bass) and Chad Taylor (drums)—finds the leader in a solemn state, rendering songs that clearly connect him to the lineage of tenor saxophonists John Coltrane and Albert Ayler, but largely without the occasional associated histrionics and instead leaning toward balladic expression. Displaying emotional depth, Lewis sounds as superb and grounded as ever. This album also continues his longstanding, mellifluous partnership with Taylor, in particular: the drummer shines as the often-contrapuntal element in the midst of near-meditative harmonies.

Album opener “Ware” is a *Love Supreme*-ish paean to the late saxophonist David S. Ware, whose spiritual free jazz influenced Lewis. The song structure is reminiscent of Coltrane’s classic composition and work of that time, especially in the sturdy, melodic bass work by Jones. The saxophonist’s flowing cadences continue on “Per 7”, where his interplay with Ortiz is noticeably striking. Taylor’s superbly-

recorded (subdued but effective) Caribbean mallet work augments the pensive piece that dovetails with “Remember Rosalind”, which calls to mind the luxurious work of Keith Jarrett’s European Quartet with saxophonist Jan Garbarek. The title cut is a departure; with the drummer’s animated pounding, Lewis and Ortiz commence on a neo-classical melody that evolves into the album’s most spirited display, as if the trio decided that Taylor’s agitated percussion offered a preferable context. As it turns out, the beginning is the “abstraction,” while the middle part is the “deliverance” that eventually returns to the forefront, still attached to its beat guru. It also foreshadows the most abstract number, “Multicellular Beings”, where this utterly comfortable band delivers a short lesson on group improvisation.

Demonstrating its versatility, the quartet proceeds into “Mr. Crick”, a pleasing modal blues, before playing a rendition of Mal Waldron and Billie Holiday’s “Left Alone”, wherein Lewis sensitively ‘sings’ Holiday’s part as Jones’ arco and Taylor’s mallets provide a darker layer before Ortiz chimes in with McCoy Tyner-esque commentary. Ortiz’ lovely intro is featured in the closer, “Polaris”, atop which Lewis plays a heart-rending passage prefacing the piano trio’s garrulous interlude, with the leader and his friends moving back-and-forth until the end.

On *Abstraction Is Deliverance*, one of 2025’s best albums, the James Brandon Lewis Quartet evinces significant rapport and instrumental command, rendering a flawless collection that rewards relistening, over and over again.

For more info visit intaktrec.ch. Lewis is at Drom Jan. 9 (part of Winter Jazzfest.) See Calendar.



A Reflection Distorts Over Water
Camila Nebbia, Marilyn Crispell, Lesley Mok
(Relative Pitch)
Dream Brigade
Lesley Mok/Phillip Golub (Infrequent Seams)
by Kurt Gottschalk

In function, “Longing”, drummer Lesley Mok’s sole composer credit on *A Reflection Distorts Over Water*—a trio album with Camila Nebbia (tenor) and Marilyn Crispell (piano)—is at least as much a composition as it is a step in their shared process. It starts off this new release’s second half, its title laying bare the emotion, and it’s an achingly beautiful piece, beginning with bowed cymbals and a slow piano melody, subtly underscored by soft saxophone tones. It’s barely a scene; it seems not much more than a moment, but a moment that’s clear enough to visualize (there’s almost certainly rain on the window). It’s no surprise that all three players are improvising through the piece. Other selections are, according to the credits, inspired by Nebbia’s open scores, but all three get composer credits for those remaining seven tracks. There’s a camaraderie at play here, reflected in the music (as distorted over water). Not all is as subdued as “Longing”, but even on the mid-tempo burners, the sentiment seems prevalent. Mok and Nebbia have played and recorded together before. Crispell, the elder of the group, seems the newbie, and is as

lovely as ever. The saxophonist is the one to push the proceedings, but it’s the implicit suggestion—or just the mere presence—of the pianist that seems to keep the session unhurried. Clear endings strongly suggest that the album wasn’t a *Sketches of Spain*-styled construction, but it works quite wonderfully as an impromptu suite. The moment they’re in seems longer than most.

The inroad into *Dream Brigade*, Mok’s duet album with pianist Phillip Golub, comes just before midpoint, with an eight-and-a-half minute take on the Jimmy Van Heusen standard “Darn That Dream”, a 1940 hit for Benny Goodman. Mok only enters well after three minutes, with gentle brushes and uneven figures. Golub suggests a stepping up of tempo, but it takes a while for it to stick. They barely hint at the original song, but somehow still deal with it respectfully. Even in the six jointly-composed (or improvised) tracks, the pair display a fluency in jazz tradition. They might have stuck a bit more closely together 50 or 75 years ago, but it’s not hard to hear what they might have been doing and where they would have been coming from. The record is hardly retro, but especially in Golub’s playing—alongside more *outré* assignments, he’s worked with bassist Cecil McBee and saxophonist Wayne Shorter—there’s the wisdom of tradition. Like the above reviewed trio album, *Dream Brigade* is also a largely low-key affair, but they do break the mold at moments. “Reverse Palindrome” is an exciting, driving piece of repeated phrases blurring into lost phonemes. And “Tunneled Throat” plays with count in an immediately likeable manner. The duo closes with another chestnut, George Shearing’s upbeat “Conception”, played nimbly if not so quickly as the original. It’s an endearing take, closing an album that’s hard not to fall into.

For more info visit relativepitchrecords.bandcamp.com and infrequentseams.bandcamp.com. Mok is at The Stone at The New School Jan. 30 (with Kalia Vandever) and Close Up Jan. 31 (with Russell Hall). See Calendar.



Armando Mi Conga
Irving Flores Afro-Cuban Jazz Sextet
(Amor de Flores)
by Scott Yanow

The very talented Afro-Cuban jazz pianist, Irving Flores, deserves to be much better known. Born in Mexico, based in San Diego for years, along the way he has worked with Poncho Sanchez, Airtio and the Spanish Harlem Orchestra, in addition to of course his own groups. A virtuoso, Flores sometimes purposely slows down the music briefly during his solos in order to wring out the maximum amount of emotional intensity, a device that works quite well. *Armando Mi Conga*, recorded in New York, has the pianist joined by John Benitez (bass) and Horacio “El Negro” Hernandez (drums), as well as Giovanni Hidalgo (congas on all but two selections), Brian Lynch (trumpet on half the album), and Norbert Stachel (tenor, clarinet, flute and baritone, one number apiece). Three of the performances utilize all of the musicians to form a sextet.

The music consists of eight exhilarating Flores originals, each performance memorable in its own, exciting way. The full group blazes in on the title cut. The unpredictable “Gary en Nanchital” features plenty

of changes in tempo. The boppish “With Armanda in Favignana” has stirring Lynch and Flores solos, while the romantic ballad “Tramonto a Massa Lubrense” serves as effective contrast. The passionate “Music en La Calle” is often intense. “Samba Con Sabor”’s joyful romp is far from simplistic. “Recuerdos” has the rhythm section thinking as one during the tempo changes. “Dana Point” features fiery baritone playing by Stachel. And to conclude the strong outing, a second version of “With Amanda In Favignana” has Flores creating a thoughtful unaccompanied piano solo.

In short, Irving Flores’ *Armando Mi Conga* is one of the strongest Afro-Cuban jazz recordings of recent times.

For more info visit irvingflores.com



Just You Just Me
Ted Brown Quartet (New Artists)
by Ken Dryden

Tenor saxophonist Ted Brown was one of many artists who benefited from his studies with pianist Lennie Tristano. During the late ’50s, Brown worked and recorded with fellow Tristano saxophone-playing alumni Lee Konitz and Warne Marsh, though he pursued a full-time career as a CPA outside of jazz, continuing to perform but not returning to record again until 1976, when he reunited with the former for the Konitz Quintet’s *Figure & Spirit* (Progressive).

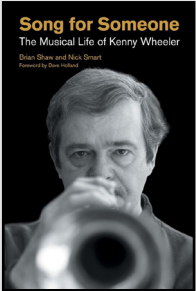
The music on *Just You Just Me* consists of live recordings in 2013, while Brown was in his mid-80s, taken from several clubs in New York and New Jersey and featuring his quartet (active between 2000-15): Jon Easton (piano) and Bill Chattin (drums), both of whom also studied with Tristano, plus Don Messina (bass). Brown’s approach has not changed much over the years, having retained Tristano’s influence and knowing a song inside out, including the lyrics. He plays with a soft, Lester Young-like tone, while acknowledging the influences of Konitz and Marsh as he continued to grow as an improviser.

The songs are all decades-old standards, starting with the warhorse “After You’ve Gone”, played at a brisk tempo by the driving rhythm section, the leader sharing the solo spotlight with Easton. The setting of “Gone With the Wind” is a foot-tapping swinger, again showcasing the pianist, this time taking a more abstract approach. The breezy rendition of “It’s You Or No One” finds the saxophonist at a creative peak, making great use of solo space and also featuring each member of his band to excellent effect. The leader embraces the melancholy air of “Everything Happens to Me”, conveying the lyric’s message with his dry toned, poignant tenor playing, accentuated by Chattin’s brushwork and featuring Messina’s understated bass lines backed by soft scatting. The Tristano spirit is on full display in the snappy finale of “I’m Getting Sentimental Over You”, taking the tune out of its usual slow ballad setting, the quartet achieving another highlight from these welcomed, previously unreleased performances.

It is unfortunate that Ted Brown, who turned 98 last month, isn’t more widely known, but these late in life recordings reveal a master who was still atop his game well into his 80s.

For more info visit newartistsrecords.com

IN PRINT



Song for Someone:
The Musical Life of Kenny Wheeler
Brian Shaw and Nick Smart
(Equinox Publishing)
by Ken Waxman

Diffident and self-effacing, public nervousness and disinclination to blow his own horn describe Toronto-born trumpeter-composer Kenny Wheeler (1930-2014), whose 96th birthday would be this month and who, except for Oscar Peterson, was arguably the most significant jazz musician from Canada. Chronicling Wheeler’s life, Brian Shaw and Nick Smart, trumpeters and academics, have written a 509-page biography, which includes interviews with associates from Canada and the UK.

Uncharacteristically, Wheeler took a ship to London during the big band era’s end, and knowing no one, first recorded in 1955 and established a relationship with John Dankworth as instrumentalist, arranger and composer. Praised for his compositional simplicity, notice came to Wheeler when he wrote the Don Quixote-inspired *Windmill Tiller* suite for Dankworth’s band. He ruefully admitted he was never a mainstream player. During a 2002 New York gig he left the stage rather than play a blues, and as the authors note, he became increasingly uncomfortable playing the music of others, especially “so inside the bebop tradition.” Strangely, for an established professional, Wheeler only perfected his individual voice in the ’60s when he became a regular on gigs organized by younger players in London’s free music scene, which led to a 1971-76 tenure in Anthony Braxton’s quartet and extended affiliations with the Globe Unity Orchestra in Europe. He began recording for ECM with groups such as Azimuth and finally under his own name with hand-picked sidemen. He also taught at the Banff (Alberta, Canada) Centre for the Arts Jazz Workshop from 1983-98, mentoring another generation of improvisers.

Song for Someone catalogs every Wheeler recording no matter how obscure. The authors analyze what they hear as his exemplary playing in virtually every case and publish encomiums from other musicians. The book is no panegyric though. Shaw and Smart report on the trumpeter’s frequent indecision, sometime innocence and, in his last decades, increasing crankiness. This led him to play music he wasn’t comfortable with and share publishing on his classic “Everyone’s Song But My Own” by not carefully reading a contract, amidst growing general bitterness. Yet, while his hearing, eyesight and mobility deteriorated as he aged, Wheeler continued recording and gigging until shortly before his death.

What Shaw and Smart have done through scholarship and research is create a jazz biography in a manner that should be followed by others. Very likely it will remain the definitive work on Wheeler.

For more info visit equinoxpub.com

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