

BOXED SET



The Complete Live at the Plugged Nickel 1965
Miles Davis (Columbia-Legacy)
 by Tom Greenland

On vinyl and CD for the first time in 30 years (as a 10-LP or 8-CD boxed set with updated packaging, archival photos and new liner notes), *The Complete Live at the Plugged Nickel 1965* sessions—released in conjunction with Miles Davis’ centennial celebrations this year—is well worth the 7.5-hour deep-dive it takes to appreciate its considerable value. Recorded December 22-23, 1965, during a two-week run in the basement venue in Chicago’s Old Town, the result encapsulates an artistic breakthrough for the trumpeter’s “second great quintet.” The group—with Wayne Shorter (tenor), Herbie Hancock (piano), Ron Carter (bass), Tony Williams (drums)—had recorded *E.S.P.* in January that year, which documented its new approach with original compositions, but hadn’t been able to gig because of Davis’ health issues (two hip operations and a broken leg). They were further frustrated because Davis catered to audiences by playing the blues, ballads and swinging standards he was known for, and because Columbia Records wanted to record the gig. Asking these hotshots to play the same old stuff night after night is like buying a Shelby Cobra only to drive it in reduced speed zones. What they needed was an open, unpoliced road to see how well the machine would handle. So, without telling Davis, the other four made an “anti-music” pact to deliberately thwart any conventions and expectations at their upcoming gig/recording session, hoping thereby to provoke innovation through confrontation. Risky behavior, especially with the tape machines rolling, but it worked. According to legend, the temperamentally taciturn Davis never reprimanded them for the prank, presumably because he recognized the merit in their audacity.

What we hear, over 60 years later, is a young, all-star band working over familiar repertoire, finding new freedoms in old, established forms. There are seven sets: three on Wednesday (12/22), four on Thursday (12/23), and 39 tracks total. Each number follows a predictable pattern: Davis begins with a brief, often fragmentary or abstract paraphrase of the tune, then takes a solo, followed by Shorter and Hancock, returning to the end of the number with an even briefer reference to the tune. All sets end with “The Theme”. Except for “Agitation” (from *E.S.P.*), everything performed are standards, and some, such as “I Fall in Love Too Easily”, “Stella by Starlight”, “All of You”, “If I Were a Bell”, “Milestones”, “My Funny Valentine”, “No Blues”, “Walkin’” and “When I Fall in Love” appear in multiple renditions. Given these predictable elements, almost everything else on the record is refreshingly, startlingly unpredictable.

Most unpredictable of all is Williams (allegedly the chief instigator of the “anti-music” pact). Driving the entire band with a tiny tip of his right-hand stick on the ride cymbal, he eschews any expectations to keep time for the others. Instead, the drummer messes with it any and every way he can: pushing the beat by playing just ahead of the collective pulse, abruptly modulating between rubato and ballad tempos, medium- and up-swing, double-time, 3-over-4 and 4-over-3 polyrhythms, straight and swing eighth notes—all accomplished

without sounding mannered or arbitrary, without losing the groove. Like more conventional drummers, he plays “in the pocket,” but his conception of the pocket is much deeper and wider than any other drummer of his generation and any who preceded him.

Carter is Williams’ enabler and abettor, his partner in rhythmic trickery, the steadiest timekeeper of the bunch, with a solid 4/4 walking pulse at any tempo when required. However, although he plays in the same wide pocket as Williams, always in close synchrony, he’s not always playing the same meters and tempos at the same time. He might be feeling beats in 4 while Williams is feeling them in 3, or walking double-time while Williams plays half-time—roles that might reverse only a few phrases later, perhaps many times throughout a number. One of the duo’s most radical episodes of tempo hijacking occurs on “No Blues” (2nd version), where, behind Shorter’s solo, they slowly and steadily speed up, only to slow back down. Another hijacking occurs on “No Blues” (1st version) when Williams, underwhelmed by Davis’ tentative opening to a solo, abruptly launches into a fast aggressive beat, dragging Davis along behind him while Carter stands his ground. Miraculously, amidst all this rhythmic anarchy, Carter and Williams’ shared pulse feels firmly anchored.

Hancock’s role is also substantial. Just as Davis often omits crucial parts of familiar song melodies when he introduces them, relying on an audience’s memory to fill in the missing elements, Hancock typically omits crucial notes in his chords—for example, a major or minor third degree—that would otherwise clarify the song’s underlying harmony, opting instead for more ambiguous voicings and reharmonizations. His accompaniment patterns are similarly ambiguous, often based on symmetric figures that cycle over and against Williams and Carter’s polyrhythmic pulsing. His sharp ears quickly discern and echo the soloist’s ideas, but more often than not he recontextualizes and transmogrifies these ideas, dishing them back to the soloist in new shapes and sizes.

Shorter makes an outstanding contribution to these sessions through intelligent, imaginative improvisations. Listening to him on “Walkin’” (1st version), “The Theme” (1st version), “On Green Dolphin Street”, “My Funny Valentine” (1st and 2nd versions), “Four”, “So What”, “If I Were a Bell” (2nd version), “I Fall in Love Too Easily” (4th version) and “All Blues” (his most ecstatic moment) reveals a consummate artist who consistently derives and develops his ideas from the song’s melody, conveying a plethora of emotional textures without histrionics. These sessions are arguably a highpoint of his long, illustrious career.

Davis, like Williams, is a key catalyst in the collective combustion. He’s out of practice, having laid off for a year, and his chops, especially the first night, are shaky. He takes short solos with long pauses and you can even hear him grunting in dismay over mangled notes. But he’s better the second night, particularly on “Walkin’” (2nd version) and “I Fall in Love Too Easily” (3rd version). More importantly, his emotional charisma and restless creativity set a tone and a bar, bringing out the best in Williams, balanced by the cooler emotional temperatures of Shorter and Hancock. Like a great film director who’s carefully cast the players and set the scene, he knows enough to stay out of the actors’ way so that they can do their best work.

For more info visit legacyrecordings.com. Miles Davis centennial tributes this month include “A Tribute to Miles Davis” (featuring Jimmy Owens) at Flushing Town Hall Mar. 20, “Miles & Trane Centennial” at Birdland Mar. 24-28 (featuring Jeremy Pelt) and “Miles Davis at 100” at Birdland Mar. 31-Apr. 4 (featuring Sean Jones). See Calendar.



The Cosmic Piano
Matthew Shipp (Cantaloupe Music)
échappée
Joachim Kühn (Intakt)
Creeks and Stars
Ursel Schlicht (Acheulian Handaxe)
 by Daniel A. Brown

A triumverate of recent releases from Matthew Shipp, Joachim Kühn and Ursel Schlicht refocus our attention on the potential, vulnerability and volatility of solo piano performance. On these particular albums, it feels as if the respective players are seeking some form of grace or overt transcendence. Any and all trappings of traditional playing or reverential reference points are absent. Thankfully, these three notable pianists boast the best assets of restless, virtuoso playing, and their current albums each play like rewarding challenges for both player and listener.

A musician who is as conscious of traditions as much as indifferent to bowing before them, Shipp continues to morph new forms with *The Cosmic Piano*. The opening title track sets the stage: the song seems to assemble itself in real time as he methodically yet intuitively gathers together, and discards, ideas of intervals and chord fragments to unravel a sustained study of spontaneous composition. “Cosmic Junk Jazz DNA” is a chimera of stride shifts and jabbing swing, Shipp’s impressive right hand peeling off ideas and accents that veer from crystalline to dissonant grit. “The Other Dimensional Tone” is a poignant ballad, the sound of a blues changing color as it seems to float over a sonic cityscape. Over the course of the tune’s 13 minutes, the pianist reexamines and retrofits ideas; at the halfway point, the glacial chords of the song’s beginning are supplanted by a volley of harpsichord-like arpeggios that propel the performance to its end. Forward motion is given notice with the crackling “Orbit Light” and “Subconscious Piano” and a glimmering, haunting farewell closes out the session with “A Cosmic Thank You”.

Recorded shortly before his 80th birthday, *échappée* is a double-album set from veteran German pianist Joachim Kühn that is varied and impressive. Over the course of the collection’s 13 tracks, Kühn allows equal bandwidth for uptempo, if not frantically berserk pieces, along with more placid, ruminative performances. After a few cursory chordal ideas, “Höre und Sehe” quickly transforms into a swirl of syncopated flurries, bass notes jabbed into place as pivots; the catch-and-release quality of “Indiscret” boasts dissonant chromaticism offset by unpredictable rests. Kühn redirects the energy for “Dominic”, a slower, abstract waltz-feel that boasts darker-shaded chords with glassy arpeggios trickling up and down the performance. “Renata” is sheer romanticism, an elegiac mood that is offset by the pianist’s expansive chords and icy, high-end tonalities. The 13-minute showcase, “My Long Life with Brother Rolf”, is as varied and unpredictable as the musical relationship between Joachim and his late, clarinet-playing brother and longtime musical collaborator.

Inspired by a summer 2022 experience of visiting 32 locations in art-fair documenta fifteen in Kassel, Germany, *Creeks and Stars* is a seven-song collection from Ursel Schlicht that highlights her certain technique in conjunction with cerebral, ethereal improvisations. The 12-minute opening, title track wastes no time in guiding the listener along, Schlicht quickly bridling together hyper-arpeggios and fragmented chords to create a contracting and