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*Off The Record*  
Makaya McCraven (International Anthem)  
by Kurt Gottschalk

Drummer Makaya McCraven has become a key part of a vibrant and fertile, genre-free community in Chicago, playing with, producing and remixing such artists as Bobby Broom, Marquis Hill, Jeff Parker, Greg Spero and Trio Mokill, with Nathaniel Braddock and Junius Paul. He can be hard to keep track of, but this collection *Off the Record*—four EPs he digitally released in October, now committed to physical product (as a double-CD or double-LP package)—provides an opportunity to catch up with the breadth of his work. Furthering the depths of compiling, one EP is culled from multiple performances, another includes two different lineups and all feature McCraven’s post-performance editing and overdubs (percussion, keyboards, synth). Disparate sources, but the 90 minutes of music come together like four sides of the same coin. His artistry is evident as a drummer but even more so as conceiver, molder and shaper.

*Techno Logic*, the first of the four sets, could be a simple if unusual trio of cornet, tuba and drums, like a stripped-down New Orleans first line, but it’s anything but. Both horn players add electronics, setting the proceedings off in multiple directions, most markedly in the hip hop-infused “Gnu Blue” (presumably recorded at New York’s Nublu, although the set also includes recordings from Berlin and London stretching from 2017-2025). “Prime” does come close to an acoustic jazz trio, demonstrating that they could do it if they so wanted to, before electronic undertones seep in. Tubist Theon Cross is stunning here, carrying the bass with apparent ease, and cornetist Ben Lamar Gay is a deft and lyrical soloist, even if on much of this Chicago session he’s providing hyper-scat vocals and rich atmospherics. There’s a lot at play, and McCraven’s light and steady groove keeps it all moving.

*The People’s Mixtape* puts rhythm up front, with McCraven and vibraphonist Joel Ross comprising 40% of the lineup, and Jeremiah Chiu doubling on percussion and modular synth. Marquis Hill contributes to the rhythm section as well, but takes full advantage of the textures, soaring through and above with electronically-augmented trumpet solos. The four cuts were recorded last year at Brooklyn’s Public Records, a small and exacting listening space, but they work like intricate club music, Junius Paul’s deep bass providing the necessary grounding.

Much of *Hidden Out!* (recorded at The Hideout in Chicago in 2017) works like a vehicle for guitarist Jeff Parker, and works like a dream. McCraven and Paul make a great rhythm section for him, from jazzy (“Battleships”) to downright funky (“Dark Pulse”). The mid-groove fade-outs make the set feel more like a sampler than a concise whole, although “Awaze” might contain the hottest drum solo of the whole collection.

The last set is also the earliest. The initial tracks for *PopUp Shop* were recorded in Los Angeles in 2015 for King Hippo and Grown Kids Radio, with Parker (guitar), Benjamin J. Shepherd (bass guitar) and

Justefan (vibraphone). The jazz-fusion feel that runs through much of the album hits hardest on these final four tracks, but (perhaps ironically) they’re also the liveliest of the set. They lock in strong and break out smart, with what seems to be a strong feeling of playing for the audience.

*Off the Record* hardly represents everything Makaya McCraven is about, but it’s nice to have a variety of projects under one roof. The album of EPs establishes an intentionality to all his diversity, but more importantly, consistently delivers moods and grooves.

For more info visit [intlanthem.com](http://intlanthem.com). McCraven is at 92NY Apr. 24. See Calendar.



*Scenes from Above*  
Julian Lage (Blue Note)  
by Ken Dryden

Guitarist Julian Lage’s potential was recognized when barely in his teens, after being invited to perform and record with veteran virtuosos such as mandolinist David Grisman and vibraphonist Gary Burton. Demonstrating that at such a young age he was comfortable playing both bluegrass and jazz at a high level, as he matured, his musical interests continued to expand, eventually leading to a focus on composing. Now 38, Lage is a seasoned leader with an extensive, eclectic discography, which has also earned him multiple GRAMMY Awards.

His latest release, *Scenes from Above*, features a core quartet of John Medeski (piano, organ), and the guitarist’s bandmates in John Zorn’s New Masada Quartet: Jorge Roeder (bass) and Kenny Wollesen (drums). Lage composed the nine originals as a launching pad for group interaction, though there is no easy label for the music on the album. “Opal”, a soft, loping ballad, features Medeski on both organ and overdubbed piano in the background, with the leader’s subdued guitar conveying someone lost in thought while walking alone. The brisk “Red Elm” features Lage’s alternately spacious and rapid-fire technique, fueled by the potent rhythm section. “Talking Drum” blends funk with a bit of Caribbean rhythm into an engaging performance, Medeski on organ taking on a more prominent role.

The intricate bossa nova “Havens” features Lage on acoustic guitar, an instrument on which he is equally adept. His spacious approach allows plenty of interplay with organist Medeski, bassist Roeder and Patrick Warren’s hand percussion, which augments Wollesen’s ever-subtle, propulsive, rhythmic pulse. Lage’s bluesy, deliberate “Night Shade” is tinged with soulfulness and the group is economical in their playing, making each note count. “Solid Air” has a swirling, mystical air and surging organ. The laid-back nature of “Ocala” has a Jimmy Buffett-like vibe; it almost feels like a vocalist might enter once the piece is introduced. In spite of its name, “Storyville” doesn’t suggest the music of early 20th century New Orleans, but rather is an abstract work that sounds totally improvised. Medeski’s piano finally finds its way to the forefront in “Something More”, a mellow song with the leader’s once-again bluesy approach complemented by Roeder’s sublime bass playing.

For more info visit [bluenote.com](http://bluenote.com). Lage is at SOPAC (South Orange, NJ) Apr. 2. See 100 Miles Out.

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