

With a Song in My Heart: Exploring the Music of Richard Rodgers
Denny Zeitlin (Sunnyside)
by Jim Motavalli

Pianist Denny Zeitlin first recorded in the early '60s, and the octogenarian is still playing extremely well, as this, his latest album release, proves in spades. The 11-track *With a Song in My Heart: Exploring the Music of Richard Rodgers* (recorded live at Piedmont Piano in Oakland, CA) is a beautifully recorded solo piano program on which he really digs into the melodic depth of the composer's music, even though Zeitlin has picked some of Rodgers' more familiar works. So it's not necessarily a deep dive into the catalogue of Rodgers' obscurities.

"Falling in Love with Love" sets the pace. Zeitlin is a two-handed pianist who sometimes sounds like he's four-handed, while eschewing the pyrotechnics of an Art Tatum. "I Didn't Know What Time It Was" starts with firm bass notes and then explores the timeless melody in 7/4 time. The improvisational ideas come quickly, but Zeitlin never strays too far from the fundamentals of the tune. "He Was Too Good to Me", an introspective ballad, is played with great tenderness, as befits the woeful Lorenz Hart lyrics. The dashing, uptempo take on "Johnny One Note" will make even the most jaded jazz listener smile: it just sparkles all the way through, from the first rolling notes that get topped by the song's catchy hooks. The piano's bass notes rumble throughout, as if it's Cecil McBee, an early collaborator who played with the pianist dating back to 1964's *Cathexis* (Columbia), Zeitlin's leader debut. The glorious "Have You Met Miss Jones" opens with some fast, ascending thematic notes, but then steps back and dives deep into the core meaning of the tune. The most exploratory cut on the album, Zeitlin even plays the bridge in three different keys, and the transition back to the song itself is brilliantly handled. By contrast, the album closing title track is spacious and straightforward, with such a subtly keen and patient approach that you could even overdub a singer.

Overall, *With a Song in My Heart* is one of the best solo piano album releases of the last few years. And the fact that it was recorded by an artist who turns 88 this month makes it all the more to be treasured.

For more info visit sunnysiderecords.com



I Wish You Would
Dida Pelled (La Reserve)
by Wif Stenger

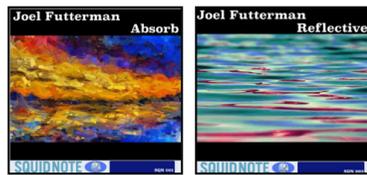
Tel Aviv-born, Brooklyn-based Dida Pelled has shown a bluesy streak in her jazz guitar and singing since her 2010 debut, which she embraces in *I Wish You Would* with a tasty set of blues classics and lesser-known nuggets from nearby on the color palette. The most

atmospheric track is "Rosa Mae" by Mary Lou Williams, which ushers you into a cozy old-time nightclub where neighborhood musicians jam and secret lovers meet. It's mostly an instrumental duet between the leader's guitar and Sullivan Fortner's understated Fender Rhodes, Pelled coming in on vocals towards the end with mellow scat and a smoky, laid-back groove worthy of JJ Cale. They're backed by the ace rhythm section of Tony Scherr (bass) and Kenny Wollesen (drums), two players who've worked with a wide array of artists, including Rickie Lee Jones and Norah Jones, who might be reference points for Pelled's easygoing vocal style.

On the title tune her voice drops just behind the beat, conversational and street-smart, over Fortner's tasty piano and Wollesen's shuffling Bo Diddley-esque beat. That's one of two tunes here by Billy Boy Arnold, a living link to the tradition: he started out with Diddley in the early '50s and is still with us at age 90. The other Arnold song, "Sittin' on Top of the World", is a sparser affair, conjuring up Pelled on a front porch on a warm summer night. Meanwhile, David Bowie nerds might notice that "I Wish You Would" is one of two songs here that he also recorded, the other being the 1920s flapper anthem "I Wish I Could Shimmy Like My" Sister Kate" (which was covered by another easygoing singer-guitarist, Madeleine Peyroux). The tune is often done as an over-the-top campy romp, but this version is a bit more laid back, still verging on bawdy, with Fortner laying down some honky-tonk and ragtime lines. Pelled's guitar and vocals are irresistible on John Lee Hooker's "Dimples" and "Blues in the Night". The latter may be the most frequently covered tune of the selections from this album, but Pelled manages to make it her own, at once sultry, raunchy and gentle. The album closes with the short, stripped-down "Trouble", showing off Pelled's voice with just simple guitar accompaniment.

After five albums over the past decade and a half, this one should bring Dida Pelled to a broader audience—if there's any justice in this blues-soaked world.

For more info visit lareserverecords.com. Pelled is at Mezzrow Apr. 1, Ornithology Jazz Club Apr. 2 and Birds Apr. 25. See Calendar.



Absorb
Reflective
Joel Futterman (Squid Note)
by Daniel A. Brown

A certain north-star of higher-reaching contemporary jazz piano, Joel Futterman (who turns 80 this month) offers up two captivating releases with *Absorb* and *Reflective*. The former features long-form pieces, while the latter finds Futterman exploring a series of miniatures. Between these two polarities, and in total with both albums, we are given a worthy update on 60-plus years of potent, unpredictable pianistic explorations.

The four parts contained within *Absorb* demand certain surrender from the listener—or at the very least, an open bandwidth. "Absorb Part 1" is fueled by a restless, microtonal rumble that seems to goad, exhort and command Futterman's cascade of high-end jabs and pointillistic ideas. Opening with a lush, modal filigree, "Absorb Part 2" gradually wanders into a chromatic stroll that soon dissolves into arcane territory, revealing that *dynamics* is a certain mastered skill of Futterman's; over the course of his career, his consciousness of the actual timbral possibilities and limits of the piano, of felt hammer hitting and releasing

string, is on great display during this piece's 23-minute run. The commentary and roiling bitstream of notes and ideas is underpinned by the physicality of touch in "Absorb Part 4", where the pianist deftly holds together glimmers of gospel, Thelonious Monk-dented blues and cosmic swirl, through a 12-minute vortex that seems to ascend to a semblance of something known, only to morph into an even greater, alien beauty. Bassist William Parker's liner notes offer that the music heard herein "connects to the sacred history of the unknown—the joy of music and the experience of living another day." An apt takeaway that emphasizes the ineffable mood that this album cultivates and sustains.

While shorter in duration, the 19 miniatures of *Reflective* are no less formidable, fanning between the cerebral and volatile. Harp-like chordal cascades and staccato strikes set the stage in "Reflective 1"; an eerie minor-key rhythm arrives and falls in "Reflective 4", Futterman toying with a playful chromatic theme that is then engulfed by a barrage of lower-register ideas. "Reflective 7" begins with a deceptively, Satie-like motif, suddenly swept away by the impulse of restlessness, brief notes flicked into the pool. Universal elements—such as the pianist's signature staccato use of triplet and five-note arpeggios, unpredictable and malleable-toned chords and a targeted use of decay—still only give the listener a partial map of where they might be led. The actual sense of "jazz" music is only provided through quick glimpses and hazy glimmers. This all-encompassing and inventive sensibility, combined with Futterman's absolute technical mastery, is a reminder of the potent work he did for many years with perhaps his greatest foil, legendary alto saxophonist Jimmy Lyons. Most tellingly, or even surprisingly, is the final "Reflective 19", a paean to the blue-flame jazz ballad, albeit one with a flickering

- RECOMMENDED NEW RELEASES**
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 - Richard Andersson—*Monk & More* (Hobby Horse)
 - Alibaster DePlume—*Dear Children of Our Children, I Knew: Epilogue* (International Anthem)
 - Pierre Favre Trio—*Bird Food* (Blaser Music)
 - GEORGE—*Looking for Consonance* (Out Of Your Head)
 - Devin Gray, Andrea Parkins, Frank Gratkowski—*Hz of Gold* (Rataplan)
 - Colin Hinton—*Three Suites* (Endectomorph Music)
 - Gregory Hutchinson—*Kind of Now: The Pulse of Miles Davis* (Warner Music)
 - Irreversible Entanglements—*Future Present Past* (Impulse!)
 - DoYeon Kim—*Wellspring* (TAO Forms)
 - Joachim Kühn—*Joachim Kühn & The Young Lions* (ACT Music)
 - Brian Lynch—*Torch Bearers* (Holistic MusicWorks)
 - Joe Magnarelli—*Decidedly So* (Cellar Music)
 - Eyal Maoz, Piero Bittolo Bon, Zeno De Rossi—*Forced to Feel* (Chant)
 - Judith Owen—*Suit Yourself* (Twanky)
 - Oscar Peterson Trio—*At Baker's Keyboard Lounge* (Verve)
 - David Sánchez—*Tambó* (Ropeadope)
 - Miroslav Vitous, Michel Portal, Jack DeJohnette—*Mountain Call* (ECM)
 - Steve Wilson—*Enduring Sonance* (Smoke Sessions)
 - Various—*Flying High: Still Soaring* (Jazz at the Ballroom/ Songbook Ink)

fire, where a century of traditional chordal resonances unfurl, filtered through the prism of his singular style of spontaneous composition and nuanced expression. Let freedom ring, indeed.

For more info visit squidnote.bandcamp.com



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 inlathem.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. Lage is at SOPAC (South Orange, NJ) Apr. 2. See 100 Miles Out.

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