



bluegrass
WDR Big Band (Directed by Bob Mintzer)
(MCG Jazz)
Big Band Bass
WDR Big Band, John Goldsby, Bob Mintzer
(Bass Lion Publishing)
 by Ken Dryden

Since the formation of WDR Big Band, the jazz orchestra of the German public broadcaster Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDR) in 1946, the group has evolved and grown into one of the most acclaimed large jazz ensembles in Europe and the world. The state-sponsored orchestra offers musicians year-round salaries and the ability to tour Europe to perform. The band also has a long tradition of inviting veteran directors, arrangers and guests for their recordings and broadcasts; Bob Mintzer has been the director and arranger for several of its recent recordings.

bluegrass expands the horizons of the big band, with music composed by two bluegrass greats who are additionally featured guests: violinist Darol Anger and mandolinist-guitarist Mike Marshall. Both played together as a duo for decades in addition to their time in the David Grisman Quintet, being well-versed in jazz as well as classical music. Mintzer's arrangements successfully fuse bluegrass with big band jazz, and all songs were recorded live. Marshall's "Slip and Slide" is transformed by Mintzer's inspired voicings

for horns and reeds, featuring the composer's intricate mandolin and a strong solo by alto saxophonist Karolina Strassmayer. The traditional murder ballad "Down In the Willow Garden" retains its wistful air even without the lyric, showcasing Anger's masterful violin and Mintzer's playful tenor as the piece takes on a more contemporary sound. Mintzer contributed the jig-like "Green Lawn", a demanding work that Anger and Marshall devour like it was long part of their repertoire. His EWI adds a modern twist to the bluegrass setting. Anger's "Replace It All" is given a funky backbeat, with a call-and-response between the band and his violin, and Jeremy Powell adds a soulful, gritty tenor. Bluegrass comes to the forefront as the guests introduce Marshall's lively "Dexter", a toe-tapping hoedown featuring the underrated pianist Billy Test, plus Mintzer and Anger.

John Goldsby retired at the end of 2024 after serving as the WDR Big Band's bassist for thirty years. *Big Band Bass* serves as a fond farewell, celebrating his contributions as a composer, featuring seven of his works, which also showcase his bass out front. Album opener, "Sonatinita" was written and arranged by Vince Mendoza, a lively Afro-Cuban number that features a flute choir with the rhythm section before the full band enters, spotlighting trombonist Ludwig Nuss then Goldsby. The bassist's uplifting "Blue Balloon" (arranged by Mintzer) is a swaggering anthem, punctuated by its surging brass and strong solos by alto saxophonist Johan Hörlén and trumpeter Ruud Breuls. The infectious groove of "You Can Call Him Maestro" (another arrangement by Mintzer) seems inspired by the writing of Thad Jones and features Goldsby's intricate bass along with guest trombonist Jonathan Böbel. Goldsby is the only soloist in his Latin-tinged "Sergio" (arranged by Michael Abene). The

combination of inventive compositions by Goldsby, the creative arrangements and top-notch musicians help to make this album stand out as a milestone recording by the 80-year-old WDR Big Band.

For more info visit mcgjazz.org and goldsby.bandcamp.com. Bob Mintzer is at Birdland Apr. 7-11 (with Yellowjackets). See Calendar.



Éclats - Live in Europe
Sylvie Courvoisier Trio (Intakt)
 by Bill Meyer

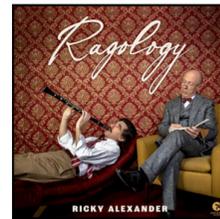
You don't have to dig far into the lore of the Sylvie Courvoisier Trio to encounter its origin story. Back in the 2000s, when Courvoisier spent a lot of time working with John Zorn, he spent some of that time leaning on her to start a trio. The pianist resisted, opining that the format was too straight, too burdened with expectation and there was no way she was going to play standards. But Zorn has ways of getting his way, and it turns out that there was plenty of potential in the idea. *Éclats - Live in Europe* is the fourth that Courvoisier, Drew Gress (bass) and Kenny Wollesen (drums) have made together since 2014. There's nary a standard among them; in fact, one thing made plain by

this concert recording is just how good the leader is at composing for this setting, and how good she and her accompanists are at renewing it.

This album's material is drawn from its three predecessors, but none of it feels rote. The performances abound with stylistic variety and engaged interaction, and while Courvoisier's writing can be very complex and demanding, it is also designed to share the joy of high-level playing between musicians and listeners. Take album closer "Downward Dog", which was originally recorded on the trio's debut, *Double Windsor*. After an intro that seems to flirt simultaneously with Cecil Taylor and George Gershwin, it plunges into a complex theme that elicits quite different solos from each player. Gress is pithy and light on his metaphorical feet; the pianist builds a lengthy statement that puts her virtuosic control of her instrument up front; Wollesen launches a series of arcing rhythmic figures that contain, but are never derailed, by his alternation of explosive and deescalating punctuations. And in that sequence of singular statements, one sees just why Zorn was right to keep bugging Courvoisier those many years ago.

These three musicians don't rehash the format's tropes; they write their own chapter in the piano trio's ongoing story.

For more info visit intaktrec.ch. Courvoisier is at The Stone at The New School Apr. 22 (with Brian Marsella and Craig Taborn). See Calendar.



Ragology
Ricky Alexander (Turtle Bay)
 by Scott Yanow

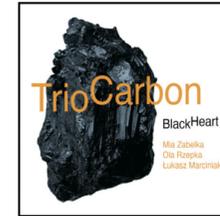
During the past few years, Turtle Bay has become one of the top labels in documenting current musicians who explore pre-Swing era music. Although jazz of the 1920s has often been stereotyped by those more familiar with 1950s Dixieland, there was actually a wider variety of music performed during that important decade than many might realize.

Ragology, Ricky Alexander's fourth album as a leader, features the clarinetist crossing several boundaries of early jazz-related styles, including the sometimes-artificial lines between ragtime, novelty ragtime and 1920s jazz as typified by Jelly Roll Morton and Sidney Bechet. For this project, Alexander's regular quartet with Conal Fowkes (piano), Bob Atkins (bass) and Kevin Dorn (drums) is joined by featured guest, multi-instrumentalist Jerron Paxton (banjo), who specializes in this era. The set starts with an uptempo version of Bechet's "Wildcat Blues", an excellent example of hot jazz. Next is a piece inspired by early 20th century Brazilian choro music ("Slidin'"), which shares some of the characteristics of ragtime but with a choro-based rhythm; Fowkes' piano solo recalls Morton a bit. "Dizzy Fingers" was one of novelty ragtime composer Zez Confrey's big hits (second to "Kitten on the Keys"), a workout for virtuosos that the quartet glides through effortlessly. Paxton's banjo playing is showcased on Tom Turpin's "Buffalo Rag" and he also joins Alexander in romping through the fast and tricky melody of "Nola". The unified but eclectic set continues with the sweet ballad "You and a Canoe" and a heated rendition of Bechet's "Blackstick". Paxton is back in the spotlight for "Ragtime Oriole", while Alexander has a feature on a cooking rendition of

"Little Bits", a number associated with pioneering jazz clarinetist Johnny Dodds. The album concludes with a pair of Jelly Roll tunes: "Shreveport Stomp", a melodic number with a very original bridge, is taken at a fast tempo and "Sweetheart O' Mine", on which Paxton takes a vocal on this relatively relaxed rendition.

Fans of early jazz, along with those who have not yet discovered this joyful idiom, are advised to explore, savor and celebrate *Ragology*.

For more info visit turtlebayrecords.com. Alexander is at Rum House Apr. 7, 21, 28. He is also at Pennsylvania Jazz Society (Bethlehem, PA) Apr. 12. See Calendar and 100 Miles Out.



Black Heart
Trio Carbon (Mia Zabelka, Ola Rzepka, Lukasz Marciniak)
 by Ken Waxman

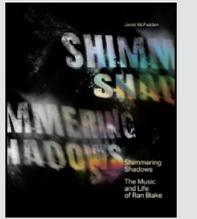
Symbolically reflecting that the carbon element is an essential building block of life, members of the Trio Carbon create equivalent musical bonding during the less than 30-minute single track that is *Black Heart*. Rather than the title's moody associations however, the piece instead unites joyously singular developments from three sophisticated improvisers. In the past, Austrian violinist Mia Zabelka has constantly moved between improvised and notated sounds, amplifying connections with a range of collaborators from free music's John Russell to composer Pauline Oliveros. Meanwhile, the Polish duo of pianist Ola Rzepka (who also teaches improvisation) and electric guitarist Lukasz Marciniak, bring their experience of interacting with multiple local and international improvisers to Trio Carbon.

Seemingly unstoppable and intricate, the intertwined trio narrative creates a polyphonic meld that makes use of every resonance from items juddering on the piano's internal strings, plus keyboard stops; wavering drones, hard banjo-like clangs and coarse flanges from the guitarist; and angled glissandi from the violinist. Just past the midpoint, Zabelka accelerates the program even more by augmenting her multi-string fiddle strokes with cackling and clenched vocalization, during which affiliated nonsense syllables are further fragmented and stretched. While it sometimes seems that the others are scrambling to keep pace with the violinist's strained prestissimo sweeps, Rzepka's string clashes and chording add sonic colors to the resulting tough and concentrated group exposition, while Marciniak's keyboard strums preserve the horizontal continuum underlying the narrative. Collective and complex, this three-fold extemporization creates quality sounds that compensate for any supposed lack of quantity in this truncated performance. In fact, there's even a brief melodic pivot from the pianist in the penultimate moments before the album climaxes with pinched and prestissimo stops from guitar and fiddle added, which uphold the program's aggressive brilliance.

Musically confirming carbon's strong but diverse elements, the trio on *Black Heart* propels a life-giving force at accelerated speeds without any musical or textural letdowns.

For more info visit setoladimaiale.net. Mia Zabelka is at Austrian Cultural Forum New York Apr. 28. See Calendar.

IN PRINT



Shimmering Shadows: The Music and Life of Ran Blake
Janet McFadden (Blackbag Books)
 by Ariella Stok

Ran Blake, whose 91st birthday is this month (Apr. 20), has always been an elusive figure in jazz: a pianist whose music moves suspensefully, creating an expectation for something that may or may not arrive. Janet McFadden's biography, *Shimmering Shadows*, 15 years in the making, draws from long conversations between Blake and one of his former students, Leo McFadden, creating a portrait that feels like a guided walk through the pianist's interior landscape. Blake's conversation, like his playing, unfolds in layers: thoughts drift across one another, older memories ghosting beneath the present moment. The book emphasizes the obsessions that became his artistic vocabulary. One of the earliest is Blake's childhood viewing of the haunting horror-noir film, *The Spiral Staircase*, a seminal 1946 thriller about a serial killer, whose shadowed imagery and psychological tension left an enduring imprint. He would often return to its atmosphere, finding in film noir a visual analogue to his music's epiphanies. The influence of gospel-centric churches, classical repertoire and the idiosyncratic pedagogy of Gunther Schuller and the New England Conservatory (NEC)'s Third Stream program all fed into that vision.

McFadden sketches a career that touches many corners of jazz history. Blake's auspicious debut recording, *The Newest Sound Around* with singer Jeanne Lee (RCA Victor, 1962), remains one of the era's most singular duo albums. Later collaborations with Steve Lacy, Anthony Braxton, Clifford Jordan, as well as fellow pianist-educator and former close friend Jaki Byard and others followed. Yet Blake's deepest impact comes from decades as an educator and advocate for a hybrid musical language at NEC, shaping musicians whose paths extend far beyond conventional jazz lines. Sara Serpa, former student and collaborator, describes Blake's unusual generosity: "Ran is a little bit of an outsider," she discloses. "He was always very kind and generous towards outsiders...people love him because he made them feel welcome." For Serpa, who arrived from Portugal uncertain about claiming jazz standards as her own, Blake provided permission: "Ran was the door to finding my voice in these songs." Improvising pianist Eli Wallace describes the first time he heard Blake perform at NEC's Jordan Hall: "He turns off the lights when he plays solo...it completely challenged my preconceptions about solo piano or improvisation."

By documenting Blake's recordings, teaching philosophy and the endless curiosity that sustained decades of work, *Shimmering Shadows* fills in a biographical gap. The book suggests how Blake's music might be understood—as a kind of private cinema, projected in chords and pauses, where memory and improvisation meet in the dark.

For more info visit ranblake.com/copy-of-books

Manhattan School of Music

JAZZ ARTS

MSM JAZZ ORCHESTRA
 Darcy James Argue, Conductor
 Aaron Diehl, piano

A Banquet for the Birds
 and other works composed and arranged by Darcy James Argue

APR 3 | FRI | 7:30 PM
 Manhattan School of Music

APR 13 | MON | 7:30 & 9 PM
 Dizzy's Club at Jazz at Lincoln Center
 Tickets required. JAZZ.ORG/DIZZYS

MSM JAZZ COMBOFEST
APR 27-30
 Experience a new jazz combo every hour and meet the artists between sets.
 Visit MSMNYC.EDU/PERFORMANCES in April for full schedule.

FOR FULL DETAILS & UP-TO-DATE SCHEDULE

MSMNYC.EDU/PERFORMANCES