

Don't Forget Your Guitar
Guitar Talk, Vol. 2: Jazz Duos/Classical Duos
Joel Harrison (AGS Recordings)
by Fred Bouchard

Restless guitar polymath Joel Harrison spans a career of constant surprise: he owns a large collection (and virtuosic technical command) of guitars, writes books on and teaches guitar history, composes bold, keening music in myriad styles and maintains a comprehensive website, as well as producing the annual Alt Guitar Summit (AGS) summer camp and annual festival plus concert presentations throughout the year. Among 25 leader dates he's unboxed: *Range Of Motion*, a joyous, multi-kulti 1997 jam band featuring double-reeders Paul McCandless and Paul Hanson; 2006's *Harbor*, which explores twangy, fleet tunes—with guitarist foil Nguyễn Lê—adrip with warm sustains and soaring, complex lines; and 2010's *String Choir* with guitarist Liberty Ellman and a string quartet playing haunting settings of drummer Paul Motian's exquisite melodies. In 2011, Harrison earned a Guggenheim Fellowship and founded AGS, arguably the premier organization to present, educate, record and foster a genial wide-ranging forward-looking plectrists' collective.

He avows that guitar duos are his "favorite means of musical transportation," and during the COVID-19 pandemic he pursued shelved projects to write through-composed classical and semi-free jazz pieces,

here performed on three CDs by AGS' companionable brotherhood. As guitar guru, writer and critic Bill Milkowski noted on *Harbor*, Harrison "cut[s] a wide stylistic swath...with heightened modal excursions, bits of swirling psychedelia, touches of funk, chamber-like delicacy, and full throttle electronic skronking."

Joel Harrison & AGS' *Don't Forget Your Guitar* recaps such styles in ten vivid, if largely contemplative duets comp-rov'ed by guitarists and AGS members. Notable are several. Bill Frisell and Emmanuel Michael gamely reinvent The Beatles' "In My Life"—and find a poignant coda. David Gilmore and Cecil Alexander uncoil a bubbly "Libreville". Wolfgang Muthspiel and Gilad Hekselman fold into Kurt Weill's lively "Liebeslied" with extra whipped cream. Wendy Eisenberg and Anthony Pirog prod us to a fuzzy abyss. Grant Gordy and Ben Garnett follow a hayseed blues with a curtain call of Carla Bley's "Lawns", a verdant vista nicknamed for pianist Larry Willis.

Guitar Talk, Vol. 2 (Jazz Duos/Classical Duos) unveils Harrison's composed classical duets, compatibly interpreted by Fareed Haque and Dan Lippel, which whimsically hew declamatory ("Pegasus") or sinewy (Lippel's solo "Boston, 1977"), employ Indian raga harmonies (hear Haque's improv on "Evening in Udaipur"), echo Tarrega's Alhambra tremolo (memorial to a dear cousin) and bubble with appealing melody ("Winter Solstice", "January"). His dozen jazz duos were arranged on-the-spot with Muthspiel, Pirog, Nels Cline, Gregg Belisle-Chi (two each), singing Camila Meza, Alan Levy, Brad Shepik and—with Mike Stern—a sly, cozy "D.C.". Harrison's duos with Cline (colleagues for 50-years!) clang and churn with brash overtones. Bookenders with Belisle-Chi go from acrid nailbiter to breathe-easy blues. To Muthspiel's pearly wisdom, Harrison gently defers in Bley tribute and tactile "Snow on Ash". Pirog and he tackle both pain and wry whimsy. Enough: go listen!

For more info visit joelharrison.com and alternativeguitarsummit.com. Harrison is at *The Local* (Saugerties, NY) Apr. 19 (with *The Guitar Choir*). See *100 Miles Out*.



Decidedly So
Joe Magnarelli (Cellar Music)
by Jeff Cebulski

Two complementary agents converged during the recording of trumpeter Joe ("Mags") Magnarelli's new quintet album *Decidedly So*, one very personal: the celebration of his marriage to the gifted organist Akiko Tsuruga (who passed away six months after these sessions, following a bout with cancer); the other serendipitous: an unplanned but welcomed audience of 35 fans who accompanied Cellar Music owner Cory Weeds on his annual "New York With Weeds" tour, including for these performances. The musicians—Steve Davis (trombone), Jeremy Manasia (piano), Clovis Nicolas (bass) and Rodney Green (drums)—were clearly inspired by their presence, as is testified by the results.

Mags himself has arguably never sounded better. Kudos to Maureen Sickler, whose sound engineering in the Van Gelder Studio brings a sheen to the trumpeter's expression and provides ample sonic touches to Shawn Pierce's mix. Album opener, "D.J.," is a driving tribute to former NBA star, the Boston Celtics guard Dennis

Johnson. Nicolas keeps up well with Magnarelli's speedy delivery atop Manasia's chromatic comping, while Davis' "Decidedly So" softly swings with the horns' lovely tandem pronouncements. A few of the album's nine selections seem to reflect the leader's thoughts during what must have been an uncertain time: the jovial, hopeful "Good Health", "When I Fall in Love" and "10th Anniversary". On the latter selection and "When" (a cover of trumpeter Blue Mitchell's version), where Magnarelli's dulcet crooning is paired with Davis' winsome additions, Manasia's lyrical asides enhance the sentiment as the rhythm section suitably supports. Richard Rodgers' "This Nearly Was Mine" is a bouncy treat, with dancing flugelhorn notes adorning the trombonist's deliciously droll accompaniment, as well as Manasia's lyrical solo, Nicolas' sturdy swing and Green's animated rhythmic contributions. Sigmund Romberg's "When I Grow Too Old to Dream" is given its own uplifting, hard-bop treatment, with the pianist's inner Bud Powell deftly leading the way to a tag team performance by the horn players. The closer, "Jimmy's Blues", a tribute to Magnarelli's brother, is a bop swinger, with the horns displaying their kinship to duos such as Lee Morgan and Curtis Fuller.

Following last year's stellar quartet album release, *Concord* (SteepleChase), *Decidedly So* reveals that Joe Magnarelli shows no signs of slipping from his position as one of our premier trumpeters and purveyors of modern jazz. This new release testifies to his fidelity with other equally-skilled musicians who share both his artistry and vision.

For more info visit cellarlive.bandcamp.com. Magnarelli is at *Jazzcultural* Apr. 8 (part of "Akiko's Organ Nights") and Apr. 30 (as leader). See *Calendar*.



Invisible Piano
John Beasley/SWR Big Band (o-tone music)
by George Kanzler

Terence Blanchard's liner notes for *Invisible Piano* provocatively tells us it "isn't just an album. It's a journey into the unknown—where improvisation meets innovation, and where technology becomes a true partner in creation." That technology is primarily the Steinway Spiro, a player piano that can enhance and expand on what is played on it—and presumably create harmonized figures and melodic lines for the sections of the big band from the pianist's improvisations. But the notes, both Blanchard's and the other material accompanying the album, don't ever seem to explain/reveal how this musical alchemy takes place. Yet since we can hear it, it definitely does. The title track comes from a Max Ernst painting that inspired pianist John Beasley in the Staatsgalerie Stuttgart Museum. It is one of five of his original compositions named after paintings in the museum, which all began as piano improvisations on the Spiro, and which presumably then created passages for the big band. The music unfurls under, around and in between Beasley's piano passages, which define the shape and melodies of each piece.

The SWR Big Band is brass-centric. Eleven of the sixteen horns are brass, from trumpets through trombones and French horns down to tuba; while there are only five woodwinds, the emphasis is on flutes and clarinets rather than saxophones. So the sonic colors

of the band are not from your usual jazz big band. On tracks such as album opener "Concentric", rhythms appear and fade, giving way to rubato sections of flutes and piano, drums cueing a final passage from brass and woodwinds over a bass clarinet ostinato. Standard big band fare like shout choruses, backing riffs and driving swing, are here replaced with passages and figures that seem to be created for the wind and brass sections by Beasley's piano improvisations on the Spiro. The results are captivating, each track creating its own quietly compelling, unique sonic tone poem. The album ends with two covers: singer-songwriter James Taylor's "Fire and Rain" and the Earth, Wind & Fire hit, "Can't Hide Love". Spectral horns shadowed by flute and a pizzicato bass solo flesh out the former, while the latter is transformed into a rhapsody for low brass, piano and a closing bass clarinet.

For more info visit o-tonemusic.de/en. Beasley is at *Birdland* thru Apr. 4 (with "Unlimited Miles: Miles @ 100"). See *Calendar*.



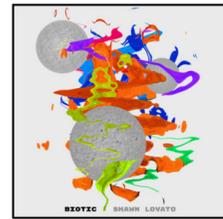
The Tomeka Reid Quartet
dance! skip! hop!
Tomeka Reid (Out Of Your Head)
by JR Simon

The fourth release from cellist Tomeka Reid's quartet, *dance! skip! hop!* again features Mary Halvorson (guitar), Jason Roebeke (bass) and Tomas Fujiwara (drums). Across five tracks in under 50 minutes, the foursome delivers original Reid compositions with the assurance and cohesion of a group that has spent years developing its shared musical language. What stands out immediately is just how approachable and accessible this music is. Each musician is widely associated with the avant garde, yet *dance! skip! hop!*, although it pushes boundaries and blends styles and textures, is never cold or overly cerebral. Instead, the quartet channels its formidable technique into something rhythmically engaging and melodically inviting. As the title suggests, this is an album that encourages motion: the tempos and rhythmic interplay simply demand it.

Reid's cello is remarkably flexible. At times it carries the melody. Elsewhere it weaves a counterpoint to Halvorson's guitar playing or reinforces Roebeke's bass lines. The entire album is permeated by the depth of the lower registers, giving the music a warm, resonant fullness. The title track opens with a memorable motif that immediately establishes the group's playful rhythmic sensibility. The third track, "Oo long!", delivers one of the album's most electrifying passages. Halvorson's distorted guitar and Fujiwara's drums surge into a brief burst of raucous energy before dissolving into a perfectly articulated pizzicato figure shared among cello, bass and guitar. "Under the Aurora Sky" begins in a completely different atmosphere: Reid's bowed cello introduces the track with a luminous tone, surrounded by Halvorson's crackling textures, Roebeke's explorative bass figures and a wash of cymbals from Fujiwara. Gradually the ensemble gathers into a collective pulse before Halvorson takes the melodic lead, her tone strikingly pure. The closing track, "Silver Spring Fig Tree", leans furthest into abstraction. Static-like sounds drift between the instruments, suggesting distant transmissions, yet the piece remains grounded by a doubled bass line and persistent rhythmic patterns.

Throughout, the mix is superb, allowing every detail of the quartet's interplay to come through clearly. *dance! skip! hop!* reflects a quartet with a clear, mature voice—music that's inventive yet grounded in a strong sense of groove.

For more info visit outofyourheadrecords.com. Reid is at *The Stone* at *The New School* Apr. 1-4. See *Calendar*.



Biotic
Shawn Lovato (Endectomorph Music)
by John Sharpe

While bassist Shawn Lovato strips back the instrumentation for *Biotic*, his third album, the scale of his compositional ambition—already evident on *Cycle of Animation* (2017) and *Microcosms* (2022)—remains undimmed. His trio unites celebrated saxophonist Ingrid Laubrock, in whose Grammy Season band he performs, and drummer Henry Mermer, another Laubrock alumnus from her Lillith sextet. Together they thoroughly inhabit seven tightly-choreographed Lovato originals that still allow moments where form dissolves into pure expression. The leader's bass furnishes the program's tensile core. Rhythmic and precise, he preserves the idea of a piece, even when he steps into the spotlight. Laubrock too works inventively within Lovato's parameters. Never less than poised, she embellishes a restricted palette with digressions into odd tonality that assume heightened resonance, serving as flashes of color that enliven whatever surrounds them. Mermer, whose name might be a homonym for his approach here, rarely raises his voice. But while often on brushes, his restraint doesn't impinge on onostentatious propulsion and coloration.

With those personalities in play, the intricately-beveled compositions layer simple elements into sassy designs. On the opener "Spling", tenor and bass lurch forward in a compelling but jittery embrace, until Laubrock loosens anchor to flow across the angularity. Elsewhere, when Lovato shifts out front, Laubrock and Mermer maintain the underlying patterns, as on "Frequent Flyer". Taken as a duet, "One Step from Anything Easy" finds the written material at its most amorphous as a woozy tenor and bowed bass conversation ensues. Similarly, "Inexorable" foregrounds emotion, as stumbling pizzicato, blowsy tenor and brushed swells combine in a near-ballad rumination. All through, the threesome stays true to the bassist's intent, while still uncovering individual spaces within it. Mermer's only solo arrives toward the end of the intermittently energetic "Dirt Doesn't Burn", where his tumbling chatter morphs into a martial cadence that nonetheless honors the framing impulse. They take the most liberties with the concluding "Parachute Bloom", where Lovato's arco sawing braids with Laubrock's slippery tenor performance. Thereafter, the bassist plumbs the depths until eventually reuniting with braying saxophone before the final recapitulation.

Although the mechanics remain transparent throughout, Lovato's trio proves that clarity need not diminish mystery: the music keeps revealing new slants long after the last note settles.

For more info visit endectomorph.com. The album release concerts are at *The Jazz Gallery* Apr. 16 and *Fire Museum* (Philadelphia, PA) Apr. 20. See *Calendar* and *100 Miles Out*.

DROP THE NEEDLE



Global Jungle
Sonny Simmons
(Deal With It-Spin Records Boise)
by Daniel A. Brown

Benefitting from the labor-of-love passion revivalism surging through much niche-genre music, a recent reissue of an early '80s session by firebrand alto saxophonist Sonny Simmons (1933-2021) is worth its devotional rediscovery. Over the course of his '60s solo albums and '90s resurgence, Simmons (whose five-year deathaversary is this month) cut a deep legacy into the creation and evolution of free jazz. *Global Jungle* is a welcome arrival for both familiar and forthcoming fans to Simmons' place in the pantheon. Recorded on a budget in 1982, the session features Simmons, Perry Thoorsell (bass), Earl Freeman (fretless bass guitar), Kirk Heydt (cello) and Dylan Morgan (drums). In 1990, longtime Simmons collaborator Heydt, who also funded and produced the original session, released a cassette and CD version of the album on his Deal With It label. In his liner notes for this vinyl-only reissue, he explains that due to being "in my youth, broke as a joke," he erased over the original master takes. Forty-two years later, Heydt discovered a cassette mix of the lost sessions. Thankfully, Spin Records Boise now offers a limited-edition LP version of the music.

The title track is a ten-minute dive into dark-tinted modalities. Ballasted by a minor-key drone motif, Simmons issues a continual volley of molten licks that rewire the head theme over a call-and-response of etheric blues and warped-speed arabesque over the band's empathic, blazing accompaniment. "Steel Foundry of Love" initiates with a baleful slapped-bass and arco moan by Freeman and Thoorsell, an Albert Ayler-like bleating theme Simmons pleads to the assembled players, who respond in kind with rapid-fire response. A somber, pentatonic theme invokes and weaves throughout "The Global Prayer", bolstered by upper arco lines from Heydt, and the saxophonist offers a beatific high-register closure. "H.P.S. Zoarious" closes out the session, featuring a jolting asymmetrical melody penned by Heydt, the band more than up for empathetic explorations.

Global Jungle is a casual capture of five players plunging in deep, providing and documenting a rare intimacy. Simmons was a fearless improviser who found value in redirecting his bands to his distinct themes. While this sensibility ran contrary to the ethos of many subsequent improvisational players, he stood deep in the earthiest ground of jazz music, always finding new footing. Here is a worthy audio document of five players aiming for the high and holy. Thanks to the efforts of Kirk Heydt and Spin Records Boise, we are invited to the congregation.

For more info visit spinrecordsboise.com