

Judy Wexler



Tuesday, April 28th
9:30 pm



JIM RIDL
BILL MORING
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“A portrait in jazz
vocal artistry”
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A Gentle Reminder
These Things Happen (Corbett vs Dempsey)
Stinger
Keefe Jackson, Jakob Heinemann, Adam Shead
(Irritable Mystic)
by Ariella Stok

With two recent releases, the Chicago-based multi-reedist Keefe Jackson shows a collaborative practice that treats the past as raw material for pushing the music forward. The Arkansas-born musician moved to Chicago in 2001, and the city’s porous improvising scene has helped shape that sensibility.

These Things Happen, Jackson’s group with Amsterdam-based pianist Oscar Jan Hoogland, grew partly from encounters fostered by the concert series curated by Ken Vandermark and John Corbett at Chicago’s Empty Bottle, which frequently introduced Chicago players to Scandinavian and European improvisers. Jackson has cited the ICP Orchestra as an early revelation, and the group’s prankster spirit—along with the knotted lyricism of Thelonious Monk and Herbie Nichols, nudged by a faint punk edge—remains a guiding principle. Jackson and Hoogland deepened the partnership by visiting each other’s cities, living as temporary roommates while developing a shared repertoire.

A Gentle Reminder, their second album, reunites them with drummer Mikel Patrick Avery and adds bassist Jason Roebke. (Their 2022 debut featured bassist Joshua Abrams, Avery’s colleague in Natural Information Society.) Recorded at the Hyde Park Jazz Festival, the album feels both composed and mischievous. Jackson’s “20 Years Past 12 O’Clock” twists through a Monk-ish architecture of pauses and angled phrases, while Hoogland’s “Over Het Zijn En Het Hoera” nods toward Ethio-jazz, echoing the Dutch underground band The Ex and its collaborations with Getatchew Mekurya. A playful historical awareness runs through the album. The band renders Misha Mengelberg’s “Een Beetje Zenuwachtig” in major rather than the original minor—a karmic play on the anecdote that the late ICP pianist and co-founder once flipped the key on Monk’s “Round Midnight”. Monk’s “Well You Needn’t” fares even more strangely: the quartet bypasses the tune’s familiar entry point and circles a tense fragment of its opening hook, delaying resolution almost to the breaking point.

The group appeared last month at Sisters Brooklyn as part of Assembly, the residency curated by Luke Stewart and Lester St. Louis. Following a mesmerizing solo set from Lea Bertucci sampling wooden flute, voice and manipulated tape machine, *These Things Happen* played material from both albums alongside Mengelberg’s “De Lachende Dwerf” and Duke Ellington’s curious, rarely-heard miniature, “Zweet Zurzday”. Hoogland’s Wurlitzer, which replaced the piano he plays on the record, gave the band a swirling glow. Jackson’s tenor moved with muscular clarity, while Avery colored each piece with different textures—bells on cymbals, chants and an idiosyncratic, captivating swing—and subbing for Roebke, Stewart’s steady, yet open bass, widened the improvisational space.

Jackson’s album *Stinger*, recorded at two Chicago strongholds, Constellation and the Hungry Brain, with Jakob Heinemann (bass) and Adam Shead (drums), adheres to the same ethos of collectivism. Jackson and Heinemann share composing duties alongside pieces by Bobby Bradford and John

Tchicai. The music churns steadily—Jackson’s horn flaring at the end of “Regent”, Heinemann’s thick arco bass driving “12345”. In their hands, Tchicai’s “Oles Anders”, once spare and elliptical, becomes a slow-moving procession, the trio filling the space with patient weight. In the rhythmic swing of the title track, Jackson’s compositional voice is unmistakable—a near companion to *A Gentle Reminder*’s “20 Years Past 12 O’Clock”.

Taken together, these two albums demonstrate Jackson working in two directions at once—toward collaborators and influences across the Atlantic and at home—both paths guided by the same idea that jazz history is most alive when it is slightly unsettled.

For more info visit corbettvsdempsey.com and irritablemysticrecords.bandcamp.com



Forbidden Flowers
Shoko Nagai (Infrequent Seams)
by Sophia Valera Heinecke

Forbidden Flowers is a tremendous, otherworldly offering from pianist-accordionist-improviser-composer Shoko Nagai, supported by an all-female ensemble that boldly navigates the boundaries of genre, riding a tidal wave of deep emotion. Working backwards into greater subtlety from its explosive opening, there are abrupt endings and mid-track silences, signature to the album, which give it an episodic, otherworldly build. Arriving at varied volumes throughout gives each piece the feeling of a distinct chapter in Nagai’s personal rollercoaster, drawing on her life in New York as a female pianist navigating the male-dominated sphere of experimental music. The ensemble—Pauline Kim Harris (violin), Pam Fleming (trumpet) and Kate Gentile (drums, percussion)—brings virtuosity and responsiveness, rising to the occasion of these poignant works with solidarity and skill, continually surprising and shifting with ever-evolving lines and roles on each composition.

The album’s multi-genre palette ricochets across a spectrum of styles, with moments reminiscent of a rock opera, others of a concerto and yet others something serpentine—moments that coil and strike into the future with tightly-wound electronic insertions. Throughout, Nagai’s composing achieves intensity through the transposition and manipulation of dynamics: abrupt silences, electronic shatters that dissolve into quiet, and inversions of intensity that score conflict and resolution. “Pineal Gland” offers a soft start, but escalate with the leader’s piano lines becoming more staccato, as cymbals and a mirage of electronics ramp up. “What Are the Hidden Things of Life” opens with a unique rhythmic march, then eventually winds into an inventive drum solo at the midpoint, trickling in and out to finally break into a whimsical trio, where piano and trumpet lines intertwine with harp-like strings. Nagai’s range of instrumentation beyond piano includes keyboards, Nintendo DS, electronics and a Farfisa electronic organ with a bright, percussive sound, usually associated with the new wave. The ensemble’s interplay is striking, with each member given moments to be central. The result is an album loaded with wonder, ever-shifting yet thematically unified by the idea of change.

Forbidden Flowers is another testament to Nagai’s enduring sense of adventure and commitment to experimentation, particularly with its glistening electronic undertones. The album stands not as an isolated flash of inspiration but as part of an ongoing process—an exploration of wonder and transformation that invites listeners to embrace the forbidden and the unknown.

For more info visit infrequentseams.bandcamp.com/music. Nagai is at Anos Eno Gallery Apr. 9 and The Keep Apr. 26. See Calendar.



The Setting
The Setting (Eivind Opsvik, Elias Stemeseder, Will Graefe) (Loyal Label)
by Mike Shanley

Eivind Opsvik called his 2012 album *Overseas IV* “experimental cinematic music,” and that descriptor could easily apply to *The Setting*, new works that the bassist plays with Will Graefe (guitar) and Elias Stemeseder (keyboards, piano). Their sound veers easily from stark and minimal to lush, evoking silver screen images that express pathos, lust or something in between. Producer Randall Dunn (who has worked with the singer Björk as well as filmmaker-musician Jim Jarmusch) helps to solidify the evocative quality of the music. Among his inspirations this time around, Opsvik cites Brian Eno’s *Another Green World*—specifically the second side of that bridge between ambient music and art pop. So when the unsettling chords of “Flourishing Flakes” or the repeating guitar arpeggio of “The Big Yard” recall moments from that album, it might not be just a coincidence. On other tracks, Stemeseder, utilizing electric and acoustic pianos along with synthesizers and a lute-harpsichord, frequently locks into ostinatos that could be a hat tip to Philip Glass, although they flow longer than a typical melody from the minimalist composer.

Instruments drop in and out quickly, without sustain, occasionally blending together and blurring the sonic lines between each player. Opsvik uses a drum machine for a metronomic effect on “Corner Song” but the pulse on “By the Light of the Moon” could be the result of his hand slapping the double bass strings. Most songs forgo percussion altogether. Graefe, exclusively on acoustic guitar, often provides the more tranquil moments. “Sivilisasjon i Rommet” begins with a bowed bass and electronics creating the buzz of an industrial factory before two guitar chords provide respite from this anxiety dream. This is followed, appropriately enough, by “Time to Wake Up”, a meditation, where piano and synth both echo and toy with Graefe’s melody.

As the album concludes, it becomes clear that the album title factors into the performance, since the trio has created ten individual scenes. Sometimes a song could benefit from something extra, such as an additional “lead” instrument or even a vocal—but that spare quality eventually yields to an appreciation of the music as it stands.

For more info visit loyallabel.com. The album release concert is at Roulette Apr. 1. Opsvik is also at Nublu 151 Apr. 3 (with Jason Rigby) and Smalls Apr. 15 (with Chet Doxas). See Calendar.

BOXED SET



Zlatko Kaučič at 70: Inklings
Zlatko Kaučič (Fundacija Sluchaj)
by Stuart Broomer

Recorded in celebration of Zlatko Kaučič’s 70th birthday (he recently celebrated his 73rd), *Inklings* is a four-CD set that’s a fitting tribute to one of the great percussionists of free jazz, as well as a musician who has forged a singular leadership role as a teacher and bandleader in his home country of Slovenia. Kaučič also has maintained a significant international career with a stellar range of recurring partners, including recordings with a quartet made up of saxophonist Evan Parker, pianist Agustí Fernández and bassist Joëlle Léandre. The liner notes here make Kaučič’s status abundantly clear. In place of critical analysis or biography, there is a series of tributes from those closest to his work, other major improvisers including Léandre, pianist Elisabeth Harnik and three of the musicians who appear in this set: Fernández, saxophonist Rodrigo Amado and bassist Barry Guy. Each of the four CDs present Kaučič in a distinct setting, with musicians of different approaches, but all highly compatible. Discs one and three document duos with saxophonists, while discs two and four document two wildly different trios, each enhanced by Kaučič’s inventive presence. He is consistently engaging, matching and shining with some of the fastest-thinking and executing improvisers currently active.

The first disc presents Kaučič in duet with Norwegian tenor/soprano saxophonist Torben Snekkestad at the 2019 BCMF Festival in Šmartno-Brda, Slovenia. Snekkestad moves with perfect logic, from pensive ruminations to sudden emotive bursts, his extended improvisations taking myriad turns. On the opening, “VE”, he and Kaučič have a thoughtfully structured dialogue in which they match shifting rhythmic impulses. On “VEN”, Kaučič creates a dense field of metal percussion, with gongs, cymbals and bells suggesting a celebratory sonic tapestry that Snekkestad gradually enters, his soprano suggesting the tentative airiness of a flute, notes half-articulated, curving into silence. Barely voiced notes blur into taps that merge in the wind tunnel-like scraped steel sounds of Kaučič’s cymbals, Snekkestad eventually alternating exuberant flights, vocalic asides and murmurs, all beyond any predictability, yet all of it draped over the percussionist’s uncanny flurries and intrusions in a dialogue so closely realized that impulse, prod and aside become indistinguishable. The brief “VENC” extends that sense of interiority, Snekkestad’s tenor playing etching silence with the barest voice, gradually expanding, all of it fed by cymbals reduced to the echo of a shimmer.

The third disc has the other duo set, this time from the 2020 BCMF festival with Portuguese saxophonist Amado joining Kaučič in an improvised, four-segment suite entitled *Free Fall*. As good as the first three segments are, they’re

eclipsed by the final one, which consumes half of the 48-minute length. It begins with a heightened delicacy, occasional metal clicks from Kaučič, while Amado contrasts delicate multiphonics with lyrical figures for a few minutes. When Amado introduces a substantial line, Kaučič joins with a sudden flurry and the two are wholly engaged in an explosive dialogue in which Amado matches the tenor’s strongest historical voices, from Sonny Rollins-like rhythmic specificity, through John Coltrane-esque lyricism to Albert Ayler-ish intensity—and all are achieved with a unifying sonic character that is entirely his own. This is something that becomes increasingly clear in an extended lyrical passage later on, following a drum solo that ends in an extended duet; here, Amado alternates tense restraint and explosive release with such speed and control at the edge of disintegration that one might be awestruck, he and Kaučič always perfectly co-ordinated.

Recorded at the 2023 BCMF Festival, the first of the trios has Kaučič with German trumpeter Axel Dörner and Slovenian bassist Tomaž Grom, a younger musician who has elsewhere recorded duets with each of these partners. Their singular 36-minute piece is entitled “Tiha Misel Zabalesta,” translated as “A silent thought shined.” It is the most challenging work here, a constantly shifting exploration in which textures vary from dense and impenetrable to sparse and evanescent, always alive and always changing. The music begins as a wall of complex sound in which sorting out individual contributions can be difficult. There are also sounds that at times suggest a menagerie of large, possibly dangerous, animals, not all of which, though some, can be traced to Dörner’s astonishing sonic inventory. Early on, Grom offers some long glistandi that suggest sirens, moving to bird-like calls and then savage bowing. Later Dörner suggests a hive of disturbed bees or flapping sheets of metal. At times there are sudden openings, the trumpeter’s multiphonics briefly foregrounded by a relatively conventional bass line or a traditional flurry of percussion from Kaučič; there are also moments of startling delicacy, almost a breath of chimes.

Cecil Taylor once remarked that if he played bass, he’d like to play like Barry Guy. What sets the trio of Guy, Kaučič and pianist Fernández apart is that the latter’s virtuosity also resembles Taylor’s, however different his materials. On “Inkling 2” the trio creates a dense hive of light, rustling percussive detail in which the members fuse to a degree that Guy’s bass might well pass for prepared piano. “Inkling 4”, a delicate miniature, has plucked piano strings combined with delicate bass and percussion in a piece that hints at the incidental sounds of a woodland, while “Inkling 5” is a firestorm of reverberant piano interior, siren bass and riveting percussion. The sheer integration of the three improvisers, as well as their individual virtuosity, assumes a different form with the inclusion of two of Fernández’ composed ballads, highlighting Kaučič’s luminous subtlety. “Can Ram” is so finely etched that the opening suggests that the musicians are embellishing air, while Guy’s pizzicato lines are delivered with an expressive depth rarely achieved by bassists. The concluding piece, “La Niña De La Calle Ibiza”, is a finely etched ballad, limp with empathy, Fernández’ lyricism at its finest.

For more info visit sluchaj.bandcamp.com