Heart", with Cowell's harmonic drive keeping the tune at a high level. "Brilliant Circles" begins in waltz tempo, then glides into a smooth bop vamp with the co-leaders working out furiously over the horns. "Household of Saud", a tribute to McCoy Tyner (his Muslim name was Sulaimon Saud), is straight up fire, with Cowell doing perhaps his best playing on the album, layering nimble block chords with wicked arpeggios. Tolliver is equally game, and a thunderous rhythmic coda by Hopps takes the song out. The penultimate track, "On the Nile", features McBee with one of his signature plucked solos—a rhythmic, thoughtful and sophisticated showcase for the now-nonagenarian.

For more info visit mackavenue.com. McBee is at Blue Note May 9-10 (with The Cookers). See Calendar.

Between the Lines
The BLCK Madonna
(Noir Collective/Downtown)
by Marilyn Lester

In this debut album, *Between the Lines,* relative newcomer, Ana Hoffman—whose *nom de jazz* is The BLCK Madonna—reveals a polished singer with cred in African roots (she is the child of an American father who met her Ghanian mother in the Peace Corps). But Hoffman has also been searching for identity. On track to become a pharmacist, she switched gears, deciding on jazz as The BLCK Madonna—not a religious reference, but one reclaiming the original meaning of the term (my lady) as an expression of reverence. This choice, she says, allowed her to stand "fully inside my voice as an artist." Move over Lady Gaga, Rihanna and Bad Bunny.

If Hoffman's name has been carefully-crafted, so has this eight-track album: precision engineered to a fault. Hoffman's record company is similarly marketing her debut with a precise intent, booking her into high-end supper clubs. At Baretto (Apr.11), a club with snooty aspirations to poshness, most patrons were far more interested in their own social affairs than to give a listen. But Hoffman fit in visually, in a shimmering sheath with mile-high heels. Her band, also on the album, was a study in what multiple studio takes can do, versus live playing. Sharp and tight on the recording, their instrumental opener of "Lady in My Life" at Baretto was lackluster. Pianist Sam Towse phoned it in, bassist Rafael Enciso made a concerted effort, but tenor saxophonist Santosh Sharma seemed unfocused. The gold star goes to drummer Christian McGhee who showed flashes of genius. On the album's version of "Night and Day", a respectable Sharma leads the way with Towse creatively featured. Live, with Hoffman out front, it was McGhee who shone. No verse, but the drummer evidently had it in his head with sticks on rim-driven beats, masterfully calling up the famous intro of "Like the tick tick tock of the stately clock/As it stands against the wall."

"Afro Blue" opens the album, at a slowed tempo, with a vocal call acting as a kind of mystic invocation. Used as the closer in concert, the band awakened: juiced up, swing added, the vocal call repeated as a call-to-action. McGhee applied clearly-defined African rhythmic patterns, with Enciso's electric bass raising the energy to the sky. "My Funny Valentine", live, featured Sharma's voicings effectively offered as musical commentary. Conversely, the album's version borders on aggression, driven by Enciso's insistent pizzicato. The highlight of the set (not on the album) was a robust "A Night in Tunisia" with plenty of scat and Sharma finally finding a groove.

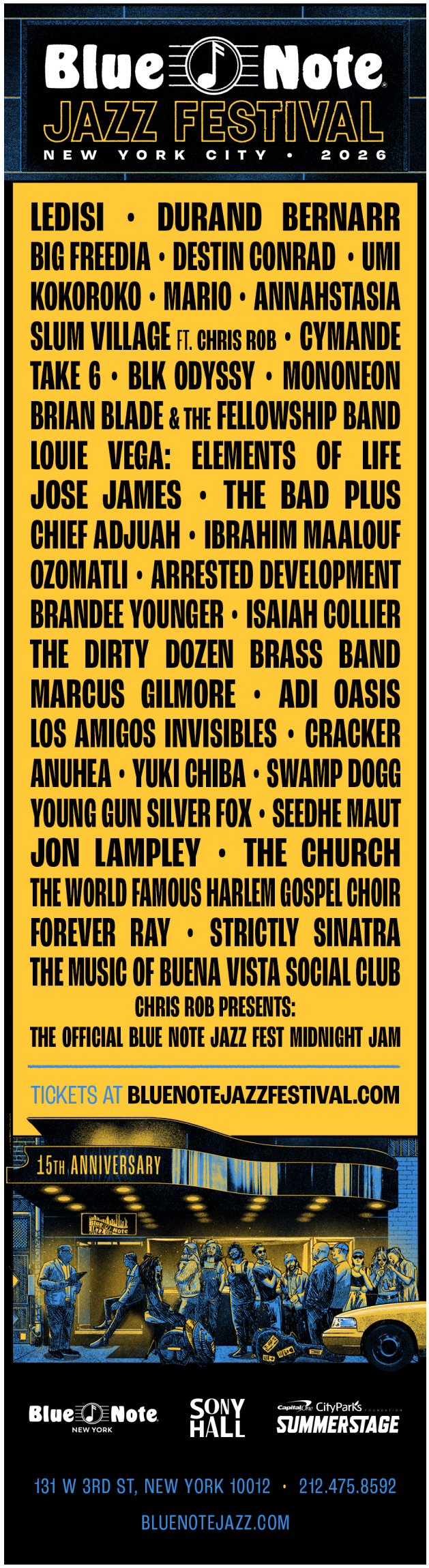
On *Between the Lines,* Hoffman's sweet soprano is almost girlish, but live was earthier, more engaging. Ultimately, this debut has appeal. Find a plush chair, mix a cocktail and enjoy as you contemplate where this determined young artist may go.

For more info visit theblckmadonna.com

Come O Light
Maryanne de Prophetis (ENNA)
by John Pietaro

The vocalist, poet, composer and conceptualist, Maryanne de Prophetis, stands as unique within NYC's new jazz community; her blend of song, vocalization, experimentalism, and a music culled from many folk traditions, is at once pensive and restless. Her latest album, *Come O Light*, is perhaps the prime example of de Prophetis' course.

From the opening title track, the amalgam calls on the breathy voices of the vocalist and Ron Horton (flugelhorn) as they're bathed in the wonderous, free variations of Gary Versace (piano) and spacious accented bombs of Satoshi Takeishi (drums). The effect of unison piano and flugelhorn, or Shoko Nagai (accordion) and de Prophetis' voice just above a whisper, is utterly haunting. But the haunt continues on the initially instrumental "Car Man" with Jay Anderson (bass), met by Nagai's synthesizer-like accordion (she uses the instrument as do few others) and Versace's piano flourishes, which careen into gorgeous high modernism. The tension fueled by the leader's vocalizations—where "yeah-yeah" can be heard within silvery vocal streams—is kept just beneath the surface. Other selections are built on more conventional melodies, such as the emotive "Song for Jeanne", heard lushly though mournfully in piano and bass before her vocal enters, featuring a mastery of dynamics. At first listen, the piece seemed to be for the late singer-poet-composer Jeanne Lee due to its beautiful complexity and long tones; the leader clarified that it's dedicated to her friend Jeanne Stosser Strong. The poetry, however, seems born of dream imagery: "Rise up where there are mountains and hills/drink waters of her timeless eye that washes us/Have we met on this green pasture/all who sought her there?/Who come and go with her undivided heart/she keeps/She does not sleep or slumber now/we come and go."

Lost years mark "Refusal #2", where Blue Note-like riffs and perfect rhythm section propulsion sidle Versace's 20th century chromaticism. Once de Prophetis claims the space, her voice goes free-fall and one hears echoes of her close friend, the late Jay Clayton. Such expansive techniques are ideally heard in the vocalist's freely improvised duet with Nagai, which dutifully conjures Brecht and Eisler militancy, sonic and most assuredly, otherwise.

For more info visit ennarecords.com/maryannedeprophetis. The album release concert is at Greenwich House Music School May 20. See Calendar.