

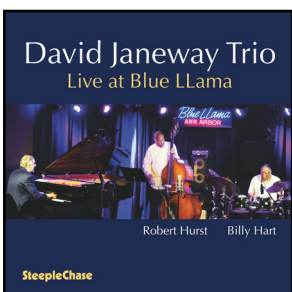
The Woods
Ryan Blotnick (Fishkill)
by Josh Gagnon

In addition to his varied musical and artistic influences, guitarist and composer Ryan Blotnick's relationship with the natural world is a driving force behind his new album, *The Woods*. Blotnick draws a comparison between a forest's ecosystem and the way in which his quartet plays together. Like the mycelium networks beneath the forest floor, his band of Tyler G. Wood (piano, organ), Adam Chilenski (bass) and Otto Hauser (drums) act as interlinked organisms, growing and changing throughout each track with a musical hive mind. With this new album, the compelling textures created throughout speak to the group's masterful work together.

The quartet opens with a warm collective improvisation to introduce the leader's original composition "The Magic". These first two minutes are something of a musical invocation, drawing in the listeners' attention in preparation for what follows. The second half of the track continues the loose, airy quality of the introduction while establishing an underlying pulse between Hauser's beat and Chilenski's bass ostinato. This leads nicely into "Pecao" (a piece inspired by Blotnick's time in the Yucatán), which establishes a clave in its outset. The terraced building of rhythmic character creates a great album opening statement. "Snowfields" stands out as a departure in character from the rest of the recording. Where an open, warm texture occupies the majority of the listening minutes, "Snowfields" is like a needle drop into a driving, distorted jam session. Named after particular areas of expert terrain on ski slopes, the feeling of adrenaline and excitement is fitting. Given the contrast from the other selections, Blotnick's guitar tone here is precise and tasteful, and the ensemble is well-balanced, even with the given increase in volume. The last two tunes stand out as highlights of the record: "Smokey Corners" and "Lurvey Spring" express a lyrical style, in which the band seems quite at home.

Throughout, Blotnick's melodic style shines, with lush accompaniment from his collaborators and, at times, the whole band lands on a chord together, adding a memorable feeling of weight to the music's texture.

For more info visit ryanblotnick.com. The album release concert is at *Threes Brewing* May 18 and *Avalon Lounge* (Catskill, NY) May 20. Blotnick is also at *The Richardson* May 19. See *Calendar* and *100 Miles Out*.



Live at Blue Llama
David Janeway (SteepleChase)
by Ken Dryden

Since retiring from his psychiatric practice a few years ago, pianist David Janeway has devoted himself

full time to his jazz career. His latest trio session was recorded live at Blue Llama in Ann Arbor, MI, in 2024. Like his earlier trio (with Cameron Brown and Billy Hart), his new band features two veteran players: Robert Hurst (bass) and once again Hart (drums). It's an interactive trio, not oriented to leader and sidemen.

The Detroit native has long lived in the New York metropolitan area, but he has absorbed the influences of numerous piano masters from around the country. The set heard herein is typical for Janeway: a mixture of time-tested works, interpretations of jazz classics and his own tantalizing originals. It is refreshing to hear his unique approach to the standard "All the Things You Are" (Jerome Kern), eschewing the B-flat introduction made famous by Dizzy Gillespie, substituting a dreamy, reflective solo introduction before the rhythm section joins in a flash, exploding into a driving post-bop setting with brief interludes of bossa nova. Janeway's playful treatment of the bittersweet ballad "I Should Care" gives it an even more lighthearted air. The poignant ballad "A Child Is Born" (Thad Jones) has become a go-to song for numerous jazz musicians; the trio approaches it here as an understated jazz waltz, allowing the lyricism of the work to naturally come through, with just enough embellishments to call it their own.

Janeway obviously appreciates "The Star-Crossed Lovers", from the Ellington-Strayhorn Shakespeare suite, *Such Sweet Thunder*, reflecting the story of Romeo and Juliet. His lush arrangement captures both the lyricism and sense of forthcoming tragedy with inspired voicings. The medley of two diverse McCoy Tyner works begins with a solo piano take of the reflective ballad, "Search for Peace", leading into a rollicking sendoff for the live audience with a brisk rendition of "Blues on the Corner". Janeway's own compositions certainly merit wider attention. "Forward Motion" was the title track to his earlier album (also on SteepleChase). Its lively, Latin-tinged, rhythmic undercurrent, fueled by Hart's powerful drumming, inspires the pianist and bassist to fully engage. And the pianist's upbeat "K's Shuffle" showcases Hurst's hip, extended arco bass solo, leading into Janeway's bluesy piano, which Hart punctuates with gusto.

For more info visit arkiomusic.com/collections/steeplechase. The album release concert is at *Mezzrow* May 8. Janeway is also at *Beanrunner Café* (Peekskill, NY) May 30. See *Calendar* and *100 Miles Out*.



mutima
Cecil McBee (Strata-East - Mack Avenue)
Music Inc.
Cecil McBee (Strata-East - Mack Avenue)
by Terrell K. Holmes

Bassist Cecil McBee, who turns 90 this month, has been an important and celebrated musician for decades, mostly as a valued sideman in bands and on recordings of other jazz greats (including saxophonists Charles Lloyd, Yusef Lateef, Pharoah Sanders and Sam Rivers). He is also central to a pair of recently reissued albums on the landmark label Strata-East, each one marking a significant debut.

By 1974, McBee was well-established when he recorded his first album as a leader, *mutima*, writing and arranging all of the songs. He plays two solos on the ambitious opener, "From Within", and from the first raga-inflected notes, the bassist creates a stunning arco dialogue that is an impassioned, lyrical *tour de force*. "Voice of the 7th Angel", though brief, bursts with

color, buoyed by the soaring vocals of the stellar Dee Dee Bridgewater, a year away from her Tony Award-winning star turn in the Broadway production of *The Wiz*. McBee's blistering pizzicato lays the foundation for the hard bop/free jazz hybrid "Life Waves". Tex Allen (trumpet), George Adams (tenor) and Alan Braufman (alto) form a fierce front line, while Onaje Allan Gumbs (piano) provides vibrant underpinnings. The title track, and "A Feeling", are each delights, with excellent playing by Adams (soprano), Art Webb (flute) and Gumbs (electric piano). "Tulsa Black" is a full-blown R&B funk dance party with robust horns, thumping percussion and an electric bass line laid down by heir apparent Cecil McBee, Jr. that lands like a string of Muhammad Ali jabs. The tune induced this writer's boogie down overbite and confirmed *mutima* as one hell of a debut.

When trumpeter Charles Tolliver and the late pianist Stanley Cowell founded Strata-East, their core principles were artistic integrity and self-reliance. The label's 1970 eponymously-titled debut release, *Music Inc.*, exemplifies their mission statement. It's not only an excellent album, but also a testament to Strata-East, as an enduring tribute to the talent, vision and determination that Tolliver and Cowell shared over their half-century long collaboration (Cowell passed away just over five years ago). While ostensibly a quartet album, with Tolliver, Cowell, McBee and drummer Jimmy Hopps, it's actually a swinging big band jaunt (with woodwind players Clifford Jordan and Jimmy Heath; trombonists Curtis Fuller, Dick Griffin, Garnett Brown and John Gordon; trumpeters Richard Williams and Virgil Jones; tubist/baritone saxophonist Howard Johnson, et al.), with Tolliver and Cowell sharing the composing and arranging. Tolliver soars above the Latin rhythm of "Ruthie's

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 - **Colin Hinton**—*Three Suites* (Endectomorph Music)
 - **Gregory Hutchinson**—*Kind of Now: The Pulse of Miles Davis* (Warner Music)
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 - **Sam Yahel**—*Quiet Flow* (La Reserve)

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 Black Madonna
(Noir Collective/Downtown)
by Marilyn Lester

In this debut album, *Between the Lines*, relative newcomer, Ana Hoffman—whose *nom de jazz* is The Black Madonna—reveals a polished singer with cred in African roots (she is the child of an American father who met her Ghanaian 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 Black 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 tick 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 theblackmadonna.com



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

The vocalist, poet, composer and conceptualist, Moryanne 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/moryannedeprophetis. The album release concert is at *Greenwich House Music School* May 20. See *Calendar*.

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