



Blues in Blueprint (12 Variations on the Blues)
Clovis Nicolas (Sunnyside)
 by Jason Gross

After the hard bop delights of his early albums (2014's *Nine Stories* and 2017's *Freedom Suite Ensuite*), France-born, NYC-based bassist Clovis Nicolas, released a virtuoso solo bass album (2019's *Autoportrait*), the austere *The Contrapuntist* (2023) with a string quartet, and pleasing trio records with guitarist Michael Veleau and saxophonist Jon Boutellier. But could he craft a credible blues album that doesn't hone in on the music's Delta origins or where the music grew and thrived in Chicago? Surprisingly, that's exactly what Nicolas achieves here in *Blues in Blueprint (12 Variations on the Blues)* with a trio including Larry Goldings (piano) and Carl Allen (drums).

Given his jazz background, it makes sense that the leader here focuses on the blues through this lens. The traditional "Old Stack O'Lee Blues" comes via Sidney Bechet's doomy, raucous version, heard here in a calmer, late-night vibe. The snappy, swinging groove of Wes Montgomery's "Twisted Blues" is retained with Nicolas taking a spacious solo, leading to Goldings' supple feature and Allen's brief, recurring drum rolls. Great American Songbook standard

"One for My Baby (And One More for the Road)" preserves its melancholy vibe thanks to the pianist's mini flourishes. Carla Bley's airy, elegant "Lawns" sounds more downcast than the original, punctuated by Allen's doomy thumps. Ornette Coleman's "Ramblin'" keeps its playful, lively feel thanks to Goldings' occasional percussive crashes and Allen's rumbling, rhythmic figures. The title track mirrors the grace and elegance of the Duke Ellington original, which originated on another blues concept album (1960's *Blues in Orbit*). The traditional hymn "Abide With Me" was previously performed by the likes of Ella Fitzgerald (ethereally) and Thelonious Monk (as a New Orleans funeral march) but here it's played in a sadly reverential, yet hopeful rendition.

Several Nicolas originals sit comfortably alongside the covers. "Hutch" features Allen's explosive playing going back-and-forth with the rest of the trio, while the sly, sultry "The Bass Speaks" has Nicolas refracting off the refined melody. "The 5:30PM Dive Bar Rendezvous" is revived from an earlier album by the bassist, transformed from a lively, joyous vibe to a more relaxed, strolling pace. Goldings' minor blues "The Double Nickle" features his measured playing surrounded by a propulsive, rhythmic performance, care of Allen. Though previously unrecorded, the leader's "Groovy Globy" had been his usual set closer, done here with a boogaloo sound. In all, this is yet another surprising twist in Nicolas' work.

For more info visit sunnysiderecords.com. The album release concert is at Cellar Dog Jul. 21. Nicolas is also at Cellar Dog Jul. 9 (with Richard Clements) and Smalls Jul. 15 (with Behn Gillece). See Calendar.

athlete, the drummer can make time seem to bend to his will, enabling him to compress incisive motifs into impossibly tight spaces, offering commentary and ignition in equal measure. Piano and drums surge into a stratospheric dialogue from the start on "Leanings". To chisel out his place, Jones takes up his bow, bidding his time before leaping into the fray once the initial tension loosens. In tandem with Drake, he bolsters a restless flow, propelled by Graewe's constant reshaping of ideas. When the pair solidify around a driving rhythmic undertow, it not only ties back to the tradition, but tempts the leader into more overtly swinging territory, albeit usually fleetingly.

In an unaccompanied intro to the concluding title track, the pianist displays the breadth of his language in a sweeping rapid-fire sequence of muscular, recurring figures, which elicits roars of audience approval. But notwithstanding such virtuosity, the album's most striking trait remains the near-telepathic responsiveness at full velocity.

For more info visit randomacoustics.net. Brad Jones is at Village Vanguard Jun. 30 - Jul. 5 (with James Brandon Lewis). See Calendar.

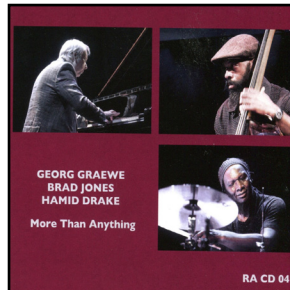


In Search Of...
Virginia MacDonald (Cellar Music)
 by Ken Dryden

Canadian clarinetist Virginia MacDonald makes her debut as a leader with these 2024 sessions, *In Search Of...*, with a rhythm section consisting of three seasoned veterans: Geoffrey Keezer (piano), Ira Coleman (bass) and Curtis Nowosad (drums). The daughter of noted tenor saxophonist Kirk MacDonald, she has previously recorded and performed with trombonist Michael Dease (who also wrote the liner notes) and worked extensively with revered bass clarinetist Todd Marcus.

Six of the album's eight selections feature her own compositions, beginning with her very first work, the intense post-bop vehicle "Last Call at Dmitri's", a constantly-shifting piece that also incorporates the wordless vocals of fellow Canadian Laura Anglade. The mood shifts with the leader's enchanting samba-flavored "In Search Of", which features Coleman's intricate bass lines along with MacDonald's lyrical clarinet playing. Hoagy Carmichael's "Stardust" (written originally as a jazz instrumental) has been a favorite of jazz musicians for decades, though the clarinetist here finds a fresh approach with a swirling, disguised introduction to this timeless ballad, working her way into it alone before Coleman enters to make it a duet.

MacDonald's bop gem "Retroggression" (a contrafact of George Shearing's "Conception") features her inspired lines, making it seem like she's been a veteran of many decades. Keezer's potent piano feature and Nowosad's drum solo further add to this track's appeal. The pensive "Up High, Down Low" has a bittersweet air, a ballad that seems made for a lyric, though her heartfelt clarinet and Anglade's wordless vocals carry the message of loss and searching for sunnier days. "Hope" is another dazzling showcase of the leader's formidable technique in an uptempo setting, with the rhythm section engaging her challenging, constantly-shifting melody. "Duke Ellington's Sound of Love" (Charles Mingus) is an



More Than Anything
Georg Graewe, Brad Jones, Hamid Drake
 (Random Acoustics)
 by John Sharpe

German pianist Georg Graewe convenes a live-wire trio with Brad Jones (bass) and Hamid Drake (drums) on *More Than Anything*, captured at the 2024 Nickelsdorf festival. Graewe (who became a septuagenarian late last month on Jun. 28) has long-favored ensembles that test his limits: for many years he led a storied threesome with cellist Ernst Reijseger and drummer Gerry Hemingway, but he has also operated at all scales from solo to chamber orchestra. His association with Drake dates back to a six-month sojourn in Chicago in 1997 and they have renewed ties regularly since. Though new to Graewe's orbit, Jones has proven his mettle with pianists such as Muhai Richard Abrams, Misha Mengelberg and Aruán Ortiz, as well as partnering Drake with saxophonist David Murray. Such connective tissue proves crucial to the trio's fluency here.

Graewe refracts the post-Cecil Taylor avant garde and classical maneuvers through an improvisatory lens to create something unmistakably individual. His playing alternates between crisply argued percussive attacks, florid Bud Powell-like runs and abrupt, harmonic switchbacks. The strength of the bond between pianist and drummer emerges immediately as they closely entwine across three lengthy collective inventions. Drake shapes a timbrally varied pulse while sidestepping explicit time, which energizes and extends Graewe's mercurial phrasing. Like an elite

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 — Derek Taylor (allaboutjazz.com)

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