



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

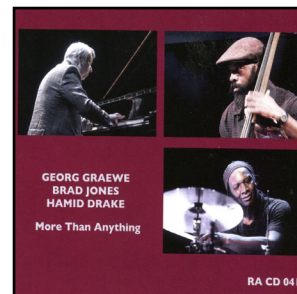
After the hard bop delights of his early albums (2014's *Nine Stories* and 2017's *Freedom Suite Ensuite*), France-born, NYC-based bassist Clovis Nicolas, released a virtuoso solo bass album (2019's *Autoportrait*), the austere *The Contrapuntist* (2023) with a string quartet, and pleasing trio records with guitarist Michael Valeanu 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 Globby" 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](http://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.



**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 Aruan 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

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, biding 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](http://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 "Retrospection" (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

overlooked gem of the bassist's vast songbook, but MacDonald has done her homework in absorbing the nuances of this warm tribute, putting her own stamp on it in a spellbinding duet with Keezer. The album closer finale is "Eternal Return of the Same", which began as an unaccompanied clarinet composition before MacDonald rearranged it for the quartet. The mixed meters and constantly changing direction keep listeners on their toes, leaving us wanting more.

Virginia MacDonald has made a major impression with her debut recording, foretelling a bright future ahead.

For more info visit [cellarmusicgroup.com](http://cellarmusicgroup.com). MacDonald is at *Zinc Bar* Jul. 13 (with Mark Lewandowski) and *Waterfront Park* (Dobbs Ferry, NY) Jul. 22 (with Bernd Reiter, as part of *Jazz Forum's Summer Concert Series*). See Calendar and *100 Miles Out*.



**The Promise of You**  
Marcus Goldhaber (Fallen Apple)  
by Marilyn Lester

In his sixth studio album, *The Promise of You*, singer-songwriter Marcus Goldhaber has crafted a musical journey with a point, a goal, via reimagined standards and original material. That aim is, according to Goldhaber, the exploration of desire, joy, love, playfulness and partnership—having it, longing for it and rediscovering it.

From opener, a lightly swinging "Skylark" (Hoagy Carmichael) to closer, "The Best Is Yet to Come" (Cy Coleman, Carolyn Leigh) a clear voyage of purpose is vividly portrayed in the album's dozen tracks. Goldhaber's clear, smooth tenor paving the way, with solid support from pianist and co-producer, co-arranger, Art Hirahara. A songbook favorite, "Skylark" is a musical "poster child" for the hope of love, and Goldhaber's interpretation firms up that desire, with Jay Rattman (tenor, soprano, clarinet), beautifully featured. Another standard, "Let's Get Lost" (Jimmy McHugh, Frank Loesser) is given happy energy via Keita Ogawa's percussion and Goldhaber's nuanced delivery of the lyric.

Six Goldhaber originals anchor the album: "Just One More Song", the title track, "Two at a Time", "Uptown Cabaret", "You Will Be Loved" and "You Are a Love Song", which, from titles alone, guide the journey. From jaunty swing to assured balladry, the singer makes his case—and with lyrics that are smart and melodies worthy of songbook status. Musicianship is first rate; in addition to the aforementioned, anchors are Michael O'Brien (bass, electric bass) and Alvester Garnett (drums), with Paul Bollenback (acoustic and electric guitars) and Summer Camargo (trumpet), each who guest on two tracks apiece.

When Isham Jones and Gus Kahn wrote "I'll See You in My Dreams" in 1924, little could they predict the evocative tune would become an enduring, popular standard. Goldhaber's scat-full interpretation is joyful and despite "lips that once were mine," hopeful of relationship repair, aided by Camargo's energetic swing. That determination is carried through in a bluesy "I'll Build a Stairway to Paradise" (George and Ira Gershwin, Buddy DeSylva). By the closer, love assured, the singer chooses a slow, dreamy interpretation of "The Best Is Yet to Come", building a story arc of quiet determination and assurance.

In *The Promise of You*, Goldhaber has created a modern, accessible song cycle and it's a joy to listen to. Nuanced work musically and vocally should lead to repeated explorations of this inspired work, a project he can certainly be very proud of.

For more info visit [marcusgoldhaber.com](http://marcusgoldhaber.com). The album release concert is at *Mezzrow* Jul. 16. See Calendar.



**Cartographies of Flight:**  
"Lines Set Afloat Towards Hope"  
Marty Ehrlich (Corbett vs. Dempsey)  
by Stuart Broomer

Marty Ehrlich first performed in duet with poet Erica Hunt in 2007. In 2013, they collaborated again on *Cartographies of Flight: Charlie Parker*, with Ehrlich leading a sextet in an homage that had the band playing Parker compositions as well as tributes by Jaki Byard and others. Hunt read her own work as well as that of other Bird-inspired poets, including Ishmael Reed and Robert Creeley. For this current work, Ehrlich has recast the sextet, with Hunt focused on her own works.

The ensemble emphasizes contrasts. Ehrlich notes his fondness for the "dark woods" of his clarinet, Sara Schoenbeck's bassoon, Erik Friedlander's cello and Matt Pavolka's bass, and their contrast with the brightness of his own alto saxophone and Ron Horton's trumpet, the diverse elements here tied together by Satoshi Takeishi's percussion and drums. There are further polarities as well, from compositions for the sextet to a piece that reduces instrumental content to Ehrlich's own improvised saxophone part. Through it all, Ehrlich's vision stands out, from the clarity of his improvised lines to the richness of the compositions. The leader as composer is very much to the fore, emphasizing thick harmonies as well as contrasting textures.

Only "Clave #1" stretches past five minutes, developing a modal mood that suggests Morocco more than Latin America, with scintillating solos that stretch from clarinet to bassoon and from trumpet to cello, before Ehrlich returns, with the others briefly and individually joining in before the theme's capitulation. Even the concise (just over two minutes) "Word Out of No Words" emphasizes the contrasting sounds of woodwinds and brass, while the keening melody of "The Arc of the Oar" stretches toward light, Ehrlich's keening clarinet alternately supported by individual winds and the whole ensemble. "Shards" highlights the improvisatory character of the music, an intensely expressive lyrical alto solo supported by Takeishi's prodding drums. They're eventually joined by Horton, his trumpet assuming the alto saxophone's course in an intense declamation of his own. The title track brings out all of the group's strengths as well as the contrasting tools in the leader's compositional arsenal, Hunt's warm contralto declaiming through both darkly-voiced ensembles and rambunctious, bopish lines.

*Cartographies of Flight: "Lines Set Afloat Towards Hope"* is a rare achievement, combining multiple voices and styles into a satisfying whole, one rich in both textural and emotional contrasts.

For more info visit [corbettvsdempsey.com](http://corbettvsdempsey.com). Ehrlich is at *Ibeam Brooklyn* Jul. 18 (part of *Wide Open Works' Summer Festival*) and *Bar Bayeux* Jul. 29. See Calendar.



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