

IN PRINT



Better Do It Now Before You Die Later
Sonny Simmons with Marc Chaloin
(Blank Forms Editions)
by Tom Staudter

Sonny Simmons (1933-2021), born 93 years ago this month, bridged the bebop and avant garde free jazz eras, one of the few to do so with such brio and creative artistry. A saxophonist who performed primarily on alto, very much influenced by Charlie Parker, he also distinguished himself as an expert improviser on tenor as well as the English horn (*cor anglais*, a larger, lower-pitched version of the double-reeded oboe). His early acclaim grew in the mid '60s when he recorded several highly-regarded albums, first with flautist-saxophonist-clarinetist Prince Lasha, and then trumpeter Barbara Donald, Simmons' wife at the time. Plagued by substance-abuse disorder, homelessness and an often-surly temperament, he somehow lived long enough to experience a phoenix-like career renaissance in the early '90s, which included high-

profile festival appearances, noteworthy recordings and even a documentary film about his life.

Better Do It Now Before You Die Later gives readers an opportunity to unspool most of Simmons' life in his own words, assembled into a linear narrative from interviews with Marc Chaloin, the French journalist and author known for his oral history of Albert Ayler. This project to chart Simmons' life began in 1998 and continued into 2012, where the story ends, *sans* info about his last decade, including the powerful 2014 collaboration between him and Moksha Samnyasin, a trio from France, or any other later achievements. Still, the 553-page book is quite a vivid, frequently despairing window to a fertile artistic era. (Be forewarned: many will be offended, justly so, by Simmons' casual racism, misogyny and antisemitism.) Simmons received early motivating support from John Coltrane, Sonny Rollins and Eric Dolphy; details from those interactions and other fruitful musical associations—such as his late-career work with multi-reedist Michael Marcus in The Cosmosamatics—give this autobiography its unique value. Elsewhere his disparagements and dismissals grow tiresome. His ascent from a sharecropper's farm in Louisiana to Oakland, CA, where Simmons began his professional career, is a worthy first-person depiction of Black Americans' Great Migration in the 1940s and a far cry from what today's up-and-coming jazz artists live through.

For more info visit blankforms.org



With Every Breath I Take
Cécile McLorin Salvant (Nonesuch)
by Kurt Gottschalk

Last year, the exemplary Cécile McLorin Salvant released *Oh, Snap!*, a short, charming and unexpected album of songs delivered like passing thoughts. Created at home and fleshed out with her longtime pianist Sullivan Fortner, it swung from folkie to techno and included a 30-second take on The Commodores' 1977 hit "Brick House". *Oh, Snap!* could have been a bid for popularity outside her jazz rooting, and it might have been readily dismissed by some (their loss). Her next step was anyone's guess. And anyone who guessed that she'd go full-on orchestral torch song for the follow-up should be playing the prediction markets.

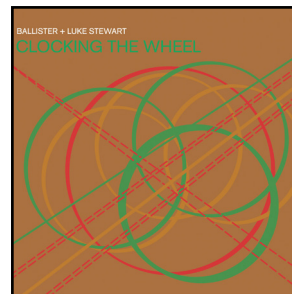
With Every Breath I Take finds Salvant crooning and swooning in stupendous fashion, positively floating through a set of ten songs with the Dutch Metropole Orkest under the direction of Jules Buckley, all in heart-wrenching arrangements by Darcy James Argue. A word about the collaborators: the Metropole backed Ella Fitzgerald and Dizzy Gillespie back in the day and, more recently, Tori Amos, Asha Bhosie, Brian Eno and Markus Stockhausen (to drop just a few names). They're good at their game. Composer-arranger Argue

has long led his Secret Society big band and did the arrangements for Salvant's brilliant, unrecorded concert work *Ogresse*. He's a tasteful and talented orchestrator.

The star of the show is an insightful and playful interpreter. Salvant is lucid and articulate with a flair for drama that's never overplayed. Stephen Sondheim's "Send in the Clowns" is almost too trite to touch; Salvant gives it a gentle caress. Michel Legrand's "Les Parapluies de Cherbourg"—maddening to anyone who's seen the movie of the same name (in English, *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg*) more than once—is played with restraint in a clear and studied French. The album drags a bit in its final third, with a nondescript Noël Coward waltz ("I'll See You Again") and another Sondheim song ("Being Alive") but comes to a stunning conclusion in about as good a take on "Lush Life"—one of two selections from the Ellington-Strayhorn book—as you can ask for, with Fortner deftly playing the cocktail pianist. But the real highlight is an eight-minute rendering of the Brecht-Weill "Barbara Song" from *The Threepenny Opera*. Like the singer, it's sly, knowing, coquettish and strident.

With Every Breath I Take is one for the ages.

For more info visit nonesuch.com. Salvant is at Little Island's *The Amph* Aug. 15-16. See Calendar.



Clocking The Wheel
Ballister + Luke Stewart (Aerophonic)
by Bill Meyer

In automotive maintenance, wheel clocking involves seating rotating objects so that the wheels spin just right. It's an apt term to apply to the music of Ballister, since each of its members engage in precision actions while maneuvering collectively at top speed; one wrong vibration could make their improvisations pile up. However, no such disasters occur on their *Clocking The Wheel*.

Dave Rempis (alto, tenor, soprano, baritone), Fred Lonberg-Holm (cello) and Paal Nilssen-Love (drums) have been playing as a unit since 2009, so they know each other's potentialities quite well. And even if someone does flub up, since Rempis is also the record label boss, bad performances simply don't make it to disc! This album is the group's twelfth, as well as the fiftieth physical release by the saxophonist's Aerophonic imprint. It documents a relatively rare NYC appearance by Rempis (presently Nilssen-Love lives near Oslo and Lonberg-Holm in a Bay area suburb), as his most common US performance destinations are his longtime home of Chicago, and his original hometown of Boston. It's an even rarer recording of Ballister with a guest: bassist Luke Stewart plays through the second of the two sets presented on this generously-filled album, recorded April of last year at Brooklyn's Roulette.

The trio is on point from the first seconds of "Carpet Joint". Rempis' alto lines descend through Lonberg-Holm's prickly plucking and seething bowed figures like a bird of prey puncturing a dense tree canopy. Nilssen-Love takes his time to emerge, then explodes with a rimshot plus sizzling cymbals. The bursting energy of its first minutes concentrates into a quieter exchange, one that uses spare, higher pitches to highlight the space that surrounds it. Density and intensity wax and wane and wax again, like a time-lapse footage of sunspots blowing out of the side of a star. Bassist Stewart moves right into the empty spaces in "Sauce

for the Goose", filling them with a hurtling forward charge that combines easily with the contributions of first cello, then Brazilian hand percussion, then wailing tenor, without slowing. The ensemble then coheres with a crash, bearing down on a good old-fashioned free blow-out. At times the forty-minute-long set eases up on volume, making space for more lyrical moments without surrendering the shuddering force that makes Ballister so reliably thrilling.

For more info visit aerophonicevents.com. Luke Stewart is at *The Stone at The New School* through Aug. 1. See Calendar.



Rhombus
Larry Goldings, Peter Bernstein, Bill Stewart
(Smoke Sessions)
by Andrew Schinder

Is there any musical instrument that makes as purely a pleasurable listening experience as the jazz organ? Its dulcet tones travel around a person's auditory canal and then bloom like springtime flowers. The organ can be funky, bluesy, spiritual or just plain pleasant. Moreover, it blends with jazz guitar like peanut butter and jelly. The organ/guitar/drums trio is one of jazz' classic lineups and for good reason: assuming a certain level of skill, the instrumentation (no need for a bassist) never fails to disappoint.

Larry Goldings (organ), Peter Bernstein (guitar) and Bill Stewart (drums) certainly uphold that tradition with their new release, *Rhombus*. They are each respectively modern masters of their instruments and have been performing and releasing music together now for over three decades. That history is quite evident here, with the three musicians' chemistry on full display. The trio mostly adapts songs by other jazz masters that weren't initially written for this format, skillfully adapting and reinventing each of them; Goldings and Bernstein also each contribute an original.

"Everything That Lives Laments" is a beloved tune written by piano legend Keith Jarrett and originally performed with the pianist's classic American Quartet (Dewey Redman, Charlie Haden and Paul Motian). The organ trio here keeps the atmosphere of the moody ballad, but perks it up a bit, featuring interplay between Bernstein and Goldings, in particular, as they switch between bluesy guitar and spiritual organ. Stewart holds down a lightly-touched but driving rhythm on the Goldings-penned title track, which contains delightfully swinging harmonies by the organist and guitarist. Irving Berlin's "They Say It's Wonderful" is given a beautifully modern treatment, with Bernstein and Goldings each taking a turn with the melody. Here, as with most of the tracks, the two musicians alternate between being out front and then as part of the rhythm section, a versatility made possible by the malleability of their instruments and their sensitive, empathic musicianship. There's a gorgeous rendition of Wayne Shorter's "Penelope", with all three offering soft, subtle instrumentation, providing space and texture, allowing each note, each statement, to properly breathe. Album closer "In Walked Bud" is a fast, fun and breezy version of the Thelonious Monk tune, leaving listeners beaming with swinging glee.

For more info visit smokesessionsrecords.com. The album release concert is at *Smoke* Aug. 19-23. See Calendar.

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