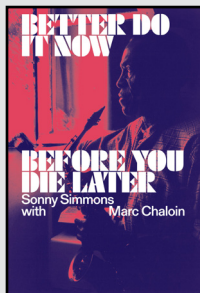


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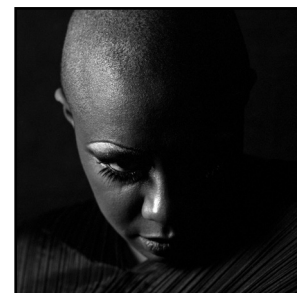
Better Do It Now Before You Die Later
Sonny Simmons with Marc Chaloin
(Blank Forms Editions)
by Tom Staudter

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.

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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

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drums **Yoron Israel**
congas, bongos **Jocelyn Pleasant**



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