



Hercules
Mátyás Bartha Trio (featuring Scott Robinson)
(Bartha)
by Terrell K. Holmes

Hungarian pianist Mátyás Bartha strikes international gold with his new album, *Hercules*. With American Danny Ziemann (bass), Austrian Christian Salfellner (drums) and another American in Scott Robinson (tenor), the quartet plays a selection of standards, show tunes and originals that vibrantly celebrate the hard bop tradition.

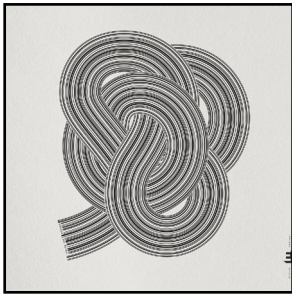
The leader's "You Dig", a tune inspired by a phrase said often by the late trumpeter Jim Rotondi, opens the album. The warm tonality of Robinson's midrange tenor defines confidence and sophistication, while Bartha's deft, crisp solo shows how quick he is on his harmonic feet. There's a downshift to a lilting arrangement of "I Concentrate on You" (Cole Porter) whose vibe recalls drummer Vernel Fournier's patented beat on Ahmad Jamal's classic version of "Poinciana" (Nat Simon, Buddy Bernier). Robinson expertly navigates his instrument with voices approximating that of a singer. His rapid-fire survey of the horn's range, from high-pitched cries to guttural growls mirrors the deepest emotions of the most impassioned vocalist. Ziemann

and Salfellner, a propulsion duo throughout, are at their best on "A Lot of Living to Do" (from the musical *Bye Bye Birdie*). Bartha swings ferociously, building complex chord structures at breakneck speed without a single misstep.

On "Stairway to the Stars" (by Matty Malneck and Frank Signorelli), Salfellner's brushes and Ziemann's reflective pizzicato complement Robinson, who, with an economy of notes and some well-timed key changes, provides a prime example of how to play a ballad. Bartha's sleek title track sounds like it has strands of "Caravan" (Juan Tizol) and Dizzy Gillespie's "A Night in Tunisia" in its double helix, which underscores this album's bop pedigree. "(I'm Afraid) The Masquerade Is Over" (Allie Wrubel) is usually played at heartache tempo but this arrangement is a joyous, foot-tapping workout, a celebration of freedom rather than a torch song of regret. The quartet's take on "Portions" (Thad Jones) is pitch perfect, with excellent playing all around and a surprising stride piano segment. The album closes on an optimistic note with Charles Stouse's "Tomorrow" (from *Annie*), a pleasing ending to a work of impressive depth, range and color.

Bartha and the quartet bring it on in *Hercules*, and if jazz fans are lucky this group will be prominent on the scene for many years, particularly with their special guest, Scott Robinson (who, on another recent recording with this exact group, *Call of the Taragato*, plays tárogató, the traditional woodwind instrument native to the pianist's country).

For more info visit matyasbartha.com. Robinson's *Call of the Taragato* is at Smalls Aug. 14-15 (with Mátyás Bartha). Robinson is also at Ear Inn Aug. 23 (with Jon-Erik Kellso's EarRegulars) and Zinc Bar Aug. 26 (with Kelly Green). See Calendar.



BaRcoDe
Ben Wendel (Edition)
by Ken Waxman

As a musician usually involved in more mainstream and contemporary projects, on *BaRcoDe*, Ben Wendel frames his tenor and EWI within the distinctive sustain and reverberations from four vibraphones and affiliated instruments. The Canada-born, Brooklyn-based Wendel, also a producer, has worked with just about everyone from Gerald Clayton to Snoop Dogg and is a founding member of Kneebody. Here he expands his purview by interaction with Patricia Brennan (vibraphone, EFX), Simon Moullier (vibraphone, chromatic balafon, EFX), Joel Ross (vibraphone, marimba) and Juan Diego Villalobos (vibraphone, electric marimba, percussion, EFX). All bandleaders in their own right, Brennan has also recorded with Alan Braufman; Moullier with Terri Lyne Carrington; Ross with Makaya McCraven; and Villalobos with the Caracas Trio.

Hovering in the background, EFX oscillations add rippling textures to the six tracks. More crucially, the restrained hollow gourd-like resonations sometimes projected from the marimba and balafon, moderate the electric instruments' harshness and intensify the balladic consistency of the tunes. Reflecting the

backgrounds of Villalobos and Brennan as well, the occasional Latin-directed percussive motifs create unique timbres when coupled with mallet bounces and gentling pings from the acoustic instruments. But most of the time, except for the occasional swift pop or multi-mallet metal bar stress, the idiophone emphasis is on maintaining a serene and stable narrative. That leaves Wendel to bring discordant reed stretches, strains and smears to the tracks, all of which but one (Antônio Carlos Jobim's "Olha Maria") are his compositions. The contrasts between hard-reed techniques and softer interpretation are most rewarding on languid tunes such as "Olha Maria". However, even when the saxophonist's split tones, segmented squeaks and refracted snarls intensify on more invigorating pieces such as "Birds Ascend", the addition of chiming vibes patterns and concentrated idiophone pressure cement the narrative flow.

BaRcoDe is definitely a notable musical departure for Wendel and demonstrates that he can loosen his playing in some fashion. For those who overlook the mettle created by the metal from the other instruments, the disc will sound like a pleasant diversion. Once attempted in this fashion however, it appears as if Wendel could go further in this new direction. Probably he should also consider a heightened and more energetic future revisit of this configuration.

For more info visit editionrecords.com/artists/ben-wendel. Wendel is at Madison Square Park Aug. 7 (part of NoMad Jazz Festival). See Calendar.



Alone At Last
Heather Pierson (Vessel Recordings)
by Jason Gross

With an output mostly spanning this millennium, the prolific, award-winning pianist-singer-composer and poet, Heather Pierson, has a resume that would bedevil a fiction writer. Raised on rock and classical music, Pierson started prog-rock and country bands before moving onto a *capella* and new-age ensembles, and later she had a folk hit and COVID-19 era viral novelty hit. Settled for now with a jazz trio, she's taken another stylistic turn on her first venture into ragtime music via a self-released album of nine originals, inspired in part by Scott Joplin.

Performed almost entirely as solo piano, Pierson picks up on the jaunty spirit of this joyful early music, creating evocative tunes mined from rich sources, including travelogues. "Happenin' Rag" opens the album with two different strains of melody, a middle habanera section and then two more forms at the end in different keys. "Old Dime Box" was inspired by an East Texas community visit and does have a bit of an old West feel to it. The lovely, short vignette "Beulah in Her Chair" is an ode to Pierson's grandmother wherein you can almost imagine her swinging away in her rocker. Inspired by another trip, to Washington state, "Stacks of Apples" has a New Orleans strut to it and like the opener, has a habanera section in the middle, leading to a bluesy conclusion. The brief, playful "Devil's Rag" was a self-imposed exercise that Pierson devised to fit in as many tritones (aka "the devil's interval") as she could into one piece. The well-named "Sunny Stroll" does feel like a refreshing walk on a pleasant day, with the pianist taking percussive breaks for emphasis to perhaps stop and smell the roses. Centered around

two types of feathered creatures (Pierson is a birder), "Catbird & Veery" offers the lithe, fluttery qualities that you'd expect on a bird-watcher's outing. The regal "Popinjay Blues", the only vocal on the album, humorously tells the tale of a bird-like chatterbox of the male species. The title track provides a wistful ending: "Alone At Last" seeks and finds peace.

Though the album is a brief 24 minutes, Pierson is thankfully considering a follow-up with more ragtime pieces.

For more info visit heatherpierson.com. The album release concert is at Parker Press Park (Woodbridge, NJ) Aug. 12 (part of Union Jazz Festival, presented by Woodbridge Arts). See 100 Miles Out.



The Longest Way Round
Ben Rosenblum Nebula Project (One Trick Dog)
by Sarah "Flake" Grosser

To quote James Joyce's *Ulysses*: "[The] longest way round is the shortest way home." For NYC-based pianist-accordionist Ben Rosenblum, this literary reference is both a mission statement and a record summary. Regarding his new album, Rosenblum has spoken about his extensive travels as a touring musician: "I find that no matter what world music forms I'm drawing from, I always come back to these musical foundations that are intrinsically, inescapably me."

The Longest Way Round, Rosenblum's third album with his Nebula Project sextet, is sonically more adventurous than his previous endeavors: 2020's *Kites and Strings* and 2023's *A Thousand Pebbles*. Here with Wayne Tucker (trumpet), Jasper Dutz (soprano, alto, clarinet, bass clarinet, flute), Rafael Rosa (guitar), Marty Jaffe (bass) and Ben Zweig (drums, percussion), plus guest percussionists Brad Dutz and Gustavo Di Dalva, the leader leans even further into his eclecticism, drawing inspiration from a potpourri of international resources—from Dominican merengue and West African and Caribbean rhythms to Irish folk music, neo-soul, J-pop and hard bop, among other traditions.

What binds Rosenblum's maximalist concept together is an uncanny ability to weave each cultural influence into an overall cohesive collection. Whether reel ("Sheridan's Reel") or reggae ("Blue Water"), he handles each inspiration with both respect and tact, and his scores find them a natural-sounding home. On paper these wild combinations might seem somewhat ambitious, but in practice nothing sounds jarring, or as if it shouldn't be there. The record is indeed focused and, somehow, Rosenblum makes it work. The inclusion of accordion adds a distinctly folksy flair that at any given moment could echo the traditional music of France, Brazil, Ireland and beyond. Save for a couple of ballads ("Scenes Frozen in Time Part 2: Old Friends" and "Last Call"), the mood is mostly upbeat, with an audibly adventurous spirit. These are the musical tales of the places Rosenblum has been, and the characters he has met along the way.

The Longest Way Round is an easy listen that should appeal to lovers of pretty melodies and beautiful musicianship.

For more info visit onetrickdogrecords.com. Rosenblum is at Saint Peter's Church Aug. 2. See Calendar.

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