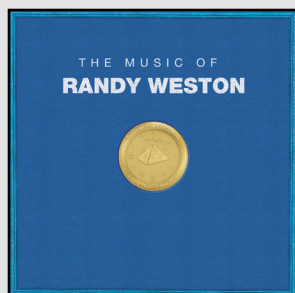


BOXED SET



The Music of Randy Weston
Randy Weston (IN+OUT)
by Fred Bouchard

This year the jazz world has been in the midst of numerous centennial celebrations of past giants of jazz—from Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Ray Brown, Tony Bennett, Lou Donaldson, Jimmy Heath and Toots Thielemans to Randy Weston and Melba Liston. This recently-released 5-LP (or 3-CD) boxed set—comprising five heretofore previously unreleased 1980s dates, ranging from big band and ensemble peppered with piano (and brass) solos to solo piano doubled with an island soul-bro—suitably encapsulates the multifaceted, world-embracing career of pianist Weston, which includes significant spotlight shed on his longtime collaborator, conductor, arranger and earth sister Liston.

Like the music's central force, man-mountain Weston, these sets are earthy, impassioned, rambunctious, challenging, endearingly untethered. He grew from roots in Brooklyn and Jamaica, then spread luxurious branches in Tangier and France, and would travel and play widely throughout US, Europe and North Africa. As musician, composer, activist, griot, ethnomusicologist, Weston followed Louis Armstrong as America's African Jazz Ambassador. Of many notable collaborators in this set (in addition to Liston) are Kingston-born Monty Alexander, the powerhouse pianist and Weston admirer; and producer Jacques Muyal, Moroccan jazz aficionado,

who facilitated Weston's enterprising Tangier night-spot, African Rhythms Club, cheer-led and annotated these dates, and died last January.

The lone ensemble showpiece of the 20-man studio date at the Brooklyn Academy of Music is the opening, concert-length, 17-minute "African Sunrise". Following fanfares, a leisurely montuno kicks off a five-stave chart, and Benny Powell states the noble trombone melody. After Weston's statement and solid solos by Johnny Coles (trumpet) and Norris Turney (alto), hearty full ensemble choruses rock under the rollicking pianist, pinging Sam Kelly bongos and fanfares. "The Last Day" unveils a rare, if brief, formal aria for soprano voice: here a vibrato-endowed Shirley Steward-Farmer. The bandleader wrote musical portraits of most of his family members: here he and Liston sketch his mother "Vivian" in warm romantic tones, with bold if echoey ensemble lines backing Harold Vick (tenor). But after Big Black's clacker triplets, taut 8-bar piano vamp, and rousing ensemble, "Blue Moses" fades out abruptly into tentative, if lively, patched-in duos of Weston with the alto saxophone of Talib Kibwe (aka T.K. Blue).

From Montreux 1985, Weston fields a truly dynamic nonet, with Liston charts interleaved with power piano. Juxtaposing trombonists, mellow veteran Powell with sly avant-gardist George Lewis, exemplifies the arranger's contention to showcase old vs. new. Lead-off monsta' jam "African Cookbook" rolls out lean solos larded with arched sectional riffing: Sahib Shihab's burly baritone preaches, Lewis' manic trombone bruises and Kibwe's alto pleads as Weston pounds and horns wail. But Bennys take all: Benny Bailey's trumpet keens while Powell's trombone spans from tuba depths to euphonium rants. Once the pianist and bassist Wilbur Little wind it down, the crowd—and posterity—go wild. Signature favorite "Hi Fly" starts leisurely, picks up steam with blistering baritone, soothes with honeyed Powell; the horns trade fours with drummer Clyde Lucas, and the pianist waltzes out the coda. Weston, in a typical

piano double portrait, meditates on heroes: "Blues for Strayhorn/Portrait of F.E. Weston" is dedicated to, respectively, Ellington's right/left hand composer Billy Strayhorn and Weston's wryly influential father. A lean nonet version of "African Sunrise" still rips fanfare cadenzas (Powell, Bailey) fore and aft, packs ace solos and drum duels. "Congolese Children" is a music-box pic of kids grinning arms-wide. "C-Jam Blues", Ellington's foot-stomping hand-clapper, wraps it, as Weston shares the stool with conductor-composer Hale Smith for a four-hand, no-slouch, scattin' sit-in. A celebration for the ages.

In July 1988 at three Euro-festivals, we hear the best of second-set Weston/Alexander duets, lightly juiced by drummers. "Hi Fly" comes in two stretch versions: companionably easy-going at Montreux, they double-time half-way, exercising maxi-ESP, with space-age codas; while at Zaragoza they stomp firmly on a lazy, late-night indigo groove. Back at Montreux, "Blue Moses" lopes like a camel train along Sahel wadis, but at Ramatuelle, hand-claps propel full-pedal, carillon bell-tolling, treble tripletting and light derring-do with congas (cowbells, African percussion) by Ghanaian Eric Asanté, plus steady bongos by Jamaican Bobby Thomas. Face-offs between idol and mentee, Weston and Alexander, are congenial, expectedly witty and mutually challenging. The two pianists suss out each other's moves, coordinate lock-hand vamps, alternate trills, arpeggios and overall merry mayhem. "Caravan" salutes Duke via trombonist-composer Juan Tizol; "Blue Monk" tips the funky fez to Thelonious with stop-time, single-note griot tales, and "St. Thomas" nods to Sonny Rollins with a bright island shuffle.

As this set proves at every corner, every encounter with Weston seems to be spiritually momentous.

For more info visit inandout-records.com. The African Rhythms Alumni Quintet (featuring T.K. Blue) celebrates Randy Weston's centennial at Marcus Garvey Park Aug. 14 (presented by Jazzmobile's Summerfest). See Calendar.



For All Your Flowers
Skúli Sverrisson with Bill Frisell (Newvelle)
Quiet Lights (feat. Bill Frisell, Greg Osby)
Florian Arbenz (Hammer)
Have You Heard? The Music of Bill Frisell, Vol. 1
The Westerlies (Westerlies)
by David Cristol

In addition to high-profile, exquisitely-executed but not entirely progressive recordings under his name, everybody's favorite guitarist, Bill Frisell, regularly steps out of his square zone to explore uncharted terrain: on collaborative endeavors such as *Owl Song* with Ambrose Akinmusire, *Breaking the Shell* with Andrew Cyrille and Kit Downes, and as a performer on Henry Threadgill's *Listen Ship* and John Zorn's *Sing Me Now Asleep*. Three further releases of recent vintage showcase the diversity of his non-leader work.

After *Strata* in 2018, *For All Your Flowers* is Frisell's second duo album with Icelandic bassist Skúli Sverrisson, author of all compositions bar one. They're highly compatible with the guitarist's aesthetic leanings, although harder to file under a country-specific genre such as Americana, while still projecting a whiff of rurality, belying a recording at NYC's state-of-the-art EastSide Sound studio. The kindred spirits play

similarly-shaped, sibling instruments, told apart by their range and players' touch on the strings: unwavering, yet intricate for Sverrisson, lithe and subtly lyrical for Frisell, who makes constant yet subdued use of the vibrato. A soloist vs. accompanist approach is eschewed in favor of joint note-knitting and world-building. Melodies are seductive but the overall feel is more apprehensive than serene. The 36-minute album duration makes this music a perfect fit for a vinyl release on upscale label Newvelle, as the last installment of its most recent 5-LP collection, Newvelle Ten.

Basel, Switzerland drummer Florian Arbenz increases the jazz factor with trio offering *Quiet Lights*. Arbenz' compositions (plus a Swiss traditional) explore various rhythms and shapes: ballad, rhumbas, hymn—with a loose enough quality to accommodate the guest player's inventions. The record finds its unity in the noticeable enthusiasm of the protagonists, as well as in the peculiar sounds of the leader's custom-made percussions. The tunes have a narrative aspect, which likely appealed to musical storyteller Frisell. His playing and that of Greg Osby (whose alto and soprano sounds throughout are a thing of wonder) veer into free abstraction at times, yet he always falls back on thematic unisons and lines. Frisell gets down with his bad self on stop-start, bluesy groove "The Barradas Opening", while the album's title tune plunges headfirst into pop-ish waters. Overall this is a constantly engaging release that combines a tendency to sparseness with a wealth of ideas.

The Westerlies, a quartet of two trumpets (Riley Mulherkar and Chloe Rowlands) and two trombones

(Andy Clausen and Addison Maye-Saxon), here perform original compositions by Frisell. During the 2020-2021 pandemic era, the guitarist-composer jotted down musical sketches in a notebook, which he then gifted to the band to freely develop, arrange and put their spin on. Frisell's unmistakable style and ethos translate well to the brass quartet's *Have You Heard? The Music of Bill Frisell, Vol. 1*. The only exception to the pandemic timeline, and penned in 2024, "A Wonderful Day" is as buoyant as its title suggests, and its catchy, upbeat nature must be the reason for its inclusion as the album opener. The variously conceived and shaped songs include a country waltz, both tender and making use of extended techniques with trombone lines sounding eerily close to vocals. "Early Winters" sees the quartet successfully evoking a frosty breeze over snowy hillsides, their playing akin to cinematic sound effects. "Pause" brings Ennio Morricone-like layering and textural triturations to the table. A *Vol. 1* mention logically calls for a second volume, and indeed a follow-up has been officially announced.

For more info visit newvelle-records.com, florianarbenz.com and westerliesmusic.com. Frisell is at Village Vanguard: Aug. 4-9 (with the Andrew Cyrille Quartet), Aug. 11-16 (Bill Frisell Trio) and Aug. 18-23 (Bill Frisell Four). He also plays duo with Ambrose Akinmusire at Baruch Performing Arts Center Aug. 3 (part of NoMad Jazz Festival) and is at Ulster Performing Arts Center (Kingston, NY) Aug. 9 (part of "Celebrating Jack DeJohnette"). The Westerlies are at Shelter Island Friends of Music (Shelter Island, NY) Aug. 26. See Calendar and 100 Miles Out.