

Donso n'goni
Christer Bothén (Black Truffle)
Rörane
Quagmire & Christer Bothén (Relative Pitch)
Serpentine
Christer Bothén, Oren Ambarchi, Johan Berthling,
Andreas Werliin (Black Truffle)
by Bill Meyer

In 1971, a hunting community in southern Mali faced an existential crisis: should they adhere to tradition and keep the music they played on a harp-like instrument called the donso n'goni exclusive to their own kind – or should they teach their old songs to a visiting Swedish musician? The opinion that prevailed was that if the visitor learned their music, he might spread the news of their community's existence. Their gamble paid off. Christer Bothén took his donso n'goni back to Sweden, where he started playing this hitherto unheard music on radio and TV. A year later, he opened his door one morning to find Don Cherry on his doorstep, ready to learn the instrument and ultimately procure his own.

The Malians could not have picked a more effective ambassador if they had tried. Bothén (who turns 85 this month) would play with Cherry throughout the '70s before going on to work as a leader and featured sideman, primarily on bass and contrabass clarinets. His career has followed a gradually ascending arc in which the last decade has been his most productive. The records under consideration here include a rare solo excursion and, demonstrating Bothén's musical adaptability, two

collaborations with established ensembles.

Donso n'goni reveals his conceptual solidity. It is his only recording devoted exclusively to the instrument, which he plays in a personal style that combines Malian tradition with his own unhurried, melodic sensibility. Bothén departs from tradition in that he doesn't use the instrument to accompany praise songs; his phrases are wordless, but they nonetheless convey a strong sense of narrative. While deep bass patterns impart momentum, more intermittent, higher pitches tilt the music's vista upwards, inviting listeners to lose themselves in his highly individual sound world.

Rörane pairs Bothén with Quagmire, which comprises Karin Johansson (piano), Nina de Heney (bass) and Henrik Wartel (drums). It looks like a standard piano trio, but it subverts conventional instrumental hierarchies and vocabularies. On each of the album's five tracks, the four musicians improvise a zone of sound or mode of interaction and then explore it with parsimonious purpose. Johansson gravitates more to her instrument's potential as a zither in a sonorous box than its familiar role as a keyboard, while Wartel and de Heney engage in enough frictional activity to kick up a cloud of rosin dust. Bothén fits right into their dynamic, sometimes probing, other times threading long, texturally rich strands of pitch with his low reeds.

Culturally, Sweden is not that big a place. Andreas Werliin, who recorded *Rörane*, is also the drummer of the band now known as the Ghosted Trio. His partners in that endeavor: Johann Berthling (bass) and Oren Ambarchi (guitar)—the latter who plays through a signal chain that very effectively filters out any evidence that his sounds originated from a plank with six strings. Ambarchi's swirling output on *Serpentine* sounds like it came from a Hammond organ or, on "Antigorite", a music box that's hit a gusher, shooting refracted plucks

into the atmosphere nurtured by his associates' rhythmic grid. Most of the time, Berthling plays an unchanging ostinato around which Werliin constructs an elaborate, constantly mutating, rhythmic superstructure. Bothén appeared as a guest on the trio's first album, but here he is an equal partner, using his donso n'goni to add gravity to their grooves and his bass clarinet to loft gradually unfurling cries over the music's pulsing surfaces.

For more info visit blacktrufflerecords.com and relativepitchrecords.bandcamp.com



The Vinyl Session
Steve Millhouse Cinema Trio (SteepleChase)
by Andrew Schinder

The movies have always been fertile ground for exploration by jazz musicians. Even forgettable films have spawned some of the genre's most revered standards. Contrabass guitarist Steve Millhouse's Cinema Trio continues this tradition of mining film music for inspiration, drawing on soundtracks both obscure and beloved.

On his group's latest album, *The Vinyl Session* (intended for listening on vinyl, though also available on CD and as a digital download), the Cinema Trio

presents four compositions that demonstrate the diversity and musical history of the movies, while also emphasizing common elements. The album reminds listeners that the best motion picture scores stand on their own as musical creations, and the group honors its source material by drawing out the richness and depth of the pieces. Allen Farnham (piano) and Adam Nussbaum (drums) join Millhouse on the record, with Tim Armacost (tenor) guesting on one selection.

The trio covers two Victor Young tunes. "Golden Earrings" originated in a 1947 romantic spy thriller of the same name, which became a standard with Peggy Lee's hit rendition (lyrics by Ray Evans and Jay Livingston). Here it swings hard, with Millhouse providing a soulful, masterful solo accompanied by the pianist and drummer. The leader and Farnham then switch roles midway through the track: Farnham takes the lead with a bouncy, buoyant improvisation as Millhouse and Nussbaum anchor the driving beat. The second Young cover, "My Foolish Heart", the title theme from the 1949 romantic drama, has since remained a popular standard. Farnham delivers an emotional, engaging piano performance, and when the rhythm section kicks in, it does so gently and subtly. The version of Antônio Carlos Jobim and lyricist Vinicius de Moraes' "A Felicidade", the opening theme of the 1959 classic *Orfeu Negro* (*Black Orpheus*), showcases Armacost. The quartet interpretation of the Brazilian tune is popping, the tenor saxophonist blasting off over a boisterous bossa nova beat before Millhouse and Farnham take turns with virtuosic showpieces of their own.

The album concludes with perhaps its most famous tune, one that should evoke deep nostalgic feelings for many listeners—"Alice in Wonderland", from the 1951 Disney animated classic. It is a wonderful version, appropriately sweet and lovely. Farnham starts out softly, but then builds up to a passionate crescendo that recalls the emotional journey of the film's heroine. Even the Queen of Hearts would be moved.

For more info visit arkiomusic.com/collections/steeplechase. The album release concert is at Five Spot Jazz Sep. 15. See Calendar.



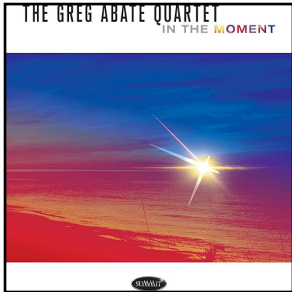
There Is No Greater Love
John McNeil Trio (SteepleChase)
by Fred Watts

SteepleChase has recently done the jazz world a service by releasing a previously unheard session from John McNeil, the late trumpeter whose two-year deathaversary is commemorated this month. *There Is No Greater Love*, a live recording made in Denmark, features Danish rhythm duo Jesper Lundgaard (bass) and Aage Tanggaard (drums), and although it is 43 years this September since the 1983 live date, the trio plays with an energy and creativity that a jazz fan would be lucky to hear in a club today.

There's an egalitarian quality that is perhaps best heard on the Charlie Parker blues "Si Si". Throughout its runtime, each of the three musicians takes the lead at varying points in shaping the intensity, from Tanggaard's fills and punctuations, to Lundgaard's breadth of volume during his solo and McNeil's harmonic explorations, which are acknowledged and supported. This interplay aids in the group's loose interpretation of the title track, which begins as the familiar standard and, over the course of its ten minutes, morphs into something else entirely.

Throughout, the trumpeter's control of sound and his technical facility are on full display. On the Jimmy Van Heusen ballad "Darn That Dream", McNeil weaves melodies around the progression, expressively adding color by bending and manipulating notes without losing his characteristically spacious quality. These modifications of color carry over into the more uptempo tracks, such as "Out" and "Lady Bird", where post-bop language is leavened with alternate fingerings, multiphonics and other extended techniques. The album closer sheds light on the fleeting nature of a record like this: the final minutes are given to the leader thanking the audience as well as his fellow musicians who had to split from the gig to catch a boat back to Copenhagen. He jokes, "We're going to take a break for about a year." How lucky we are that this recording has resurfaced four decades later.

For more info visit arkiomusic.com/collections/steeplechase



In the Moment
Greg Abate Quartet (Summit)
by Jeff Cebulski

This new album by Rhode Island saxophonist-flutist Greg Abate mixes COVID-era compositions with memories and tributes. Some have been previously recorded by Abate, but they benefit here from readings by this veteran quartet, which features Bill O'Connell (piano), Harvie S (bass) and Steve Johns (drums).

The opener "Realization (Living the Dash)" (composed after 9/11) crackles with energy, Abate's alto attack squarely in Phil Woods mode. Johns, who is stellar throughout, carries his own percussive weight supporting O'Connell's always-excellent comping and solo, as well as the bassist's deep-wooded support. The soft, Latin treatment of "The Little Men" is a tribute to Abate's sons, rendered on tenor alto the pianist's chordal accompaniment. "All or Nothin'", another COVID-era moment, represents a deliberate choice in the midst of uncertainty, as Harvie S' swinging bass communicates positivity and the leader's garrulous alto rides Johns' swing.

Another beloved family member receives a Latinesque tribute on "Kerry's Song", where Abate's affectionate flute soliloquy is accompanied by a matching keyboard lilt and melodic bass solo. O'Connell's "Black Sea" (a nod to Wayne Shorter's "Black Nile") commences with a resounding splash from the drummer as Abate, on tenor, does his Shorter best to set up an O'Connell solo that gets a nice push from the bassist. The saxophonist's eventual solo here is one of his finer moments. COVID solitude produced the title cut, which sounds inspired by "Naima" in its phrasing and its reliance on the musical partnership with O'Connell. (The album features two versions, the second a "radio cut.") Abate's rich tone, relaxed confidence and evident harmony with his mates make this another album high point. A tribute to his father, "CCA" is an affable shuffle that showcases O'Connell's pianistic depth in tandem with Abate's rich, bluesy tenor display. "Angelic" breezily honors the saxophonist's daughter, while the closer, "Into Somewhere", reestablishes Abate's alto bop cred.

For more info visit summitrecords.com. The album release concert is at Clement's Place (Newark, NJ) Sep. 18. See 100 Miles Out.

IN PRINT



Now Jazz Now: 100 Essential Free Jazz & Improvisation Recordings, 1960-80
Thurston Moore, Mats Gustafsson, Byron Coley
(Ecstatic Peace Library)
by Pierre Crépon

The authors of *Now Jazz Now* – Thurston Moore, Mats Gustafsson and Byron Coley – have collected entries on 100+ records dating from free jazz' prehistory to the year 1980. The geographical scope is gratifyingly broad, including US regional scenes, Western Europe and its free improvisation developments, Scandinavia (a strong point) and Japan. Records are typically allocated two pages: one features the cover of the album's first pressing, the other a short, often superlative text and basic recording data. The texts are signed by either ex-Sonic Youth guitarist Moore, free jazz saxophonist Gustafsson (to whom the more memorable points are owed) or writer Coley. (Entries sometimes reproduce additional parts of the album artwork.)

The selection is the book's main strength, leaning toward free jazz' more underground corners and its harsher edges (words from the "frantic" family often appear). Musicians included range from Ornette Coleman and Cecil Taylor to Bengt Nordström, François Tusques, the Black Unity Trio, FMP and British improv units, Mario Schiano, Mototeru Takagi, the Feminist Improvising Group and John Zorn. The book could act as a road map for listeners beginning to investigate free music's lesser-known corners, performing the necessary task of pointing to specific recordings among opaque discographies, while more seasoned listeners will certainly be reminded of valuable recordings they have overlooked. The authors agreed on a one-leader-disc-per-musician rule, which means that no central figures emerge. This egalitarian principle can be appreciated, but it also means that the overall picture cannot be historically representative. What emerges is a rather abstract version of free jazz' past.

It is hard to disagree with the idea that Albert Ayler's *Spiritual Unity* "is the ONE record you can't live without" – but that it is "the ONE record you need ALL versions of (and there are at least fifty variations known to date)" is obviously a different matter. Pronouncements about the importance of original pressings – some now worth thousands of dollars – are hopefully intended as humorous, but they are unfortunately paired with a certain factual fuzziness and research occasionally close to basic Googling. At times, these issues make *Now Jazz Now* feel like a book that is more about its authors' record collections than about the music itself. The question of the intended audience is never fully cleared up: owners of the equivalent of a sports car in vinyl might not need an introductory book, and newcomers should certainly be directed to free YouTube uploads rather than to premium online auctions.

For more info visit ecstaticpeace.net