

BOXED SET



**Verve Records: The Sound of America
Various (Verve)
by Marilyn Lester**

This year, powerhouse jazz label Verve celebrates its 70th anniversary, and this thoughtfully-curated boxed set of music has been released to mark the occasion. And what a job it must have been, compiling tracks for this 4-LP (180g heavyweight vinyl) or 2-CD collection. That task was accomplished by co-producer and Norman Granz biographer, Tad Hershorn, who also wrote the liner notes. Record producer and Verve founder, Granz, was an impresario to be reckoned with. By 1956, he had already established himself in the jazz world, producing as well as managing a few independent labels, including Clef and Norgran. Famously, he created Verve to provide a safe and secure home for Ella Fitzgerald, whose *Song Books* series for the label remains one of its greatest achievements. By the time Granz sold Verve to MGM in 1961, he'd established a stable of iconic figures, including Billie Holiday, Charlie Parker, Oscar Peterson, Louis Armstrong, Dizzy Gillespie, Sister Rosetta Tharpe and many, many others.

Verve was more than just a cool label: Granz made advances in production, with larger commercial possibilities in mind. He championed high-fidelity sound and released his albums with upmarket, distinctive artwork. Verve artists also benefited from a large degree of artistic freedom. That largesse was canny on Granz' part, as it led to a greater spectrum of artistic creativity, which listeners still enjoy to this day. The collection is wide-ranging; there are vocal tracks, instrumental tracks (including Charlie Parker with strings), Beatnik poetry and stand-up

comedy. The four LPs here each feature two sides of four tracks, while the two CDs contain 15 tracks apiece, all the work of "golden age" artists.

It's fair to start with Granz' pre-Verve inspiration, a series of concerts he began producing in 1944 under the title Jazz at the Philharmonic (JATP). Granz was a civil rights activist who was especially frustrated by racial discrimination in the music industry. The first JATP concert, at Philharmonic Auditorium in LA, was a multiracial benefit to raise bail for imprisoned Mexican Americans from the Sleepy Lagoon murder trial, and to support the Los Angeles Urban League. With these concerts, Granz elevated the image of jazz beyond segregated urban clubs and venues. "Blues (1st B-Flat Blues)", from the inaugural JATP concert, runs a little over ten minutes; it's a burner featuring Illinois Jacquet and Jack McVea (tenors), J.J. Johnson (trombone), Nat King Cole (piano) and Les Paul (guitar) in a high-energy jam session format. The track is a lesson in jazz history, from the era when swing was yielding to bebop. Jacquet's high-register screaming dominates much of the track, and his performance was a huge hit, as you can hear from the delighted audience cheering in the background. Recorded live, a youthful Ella, under the wing of and in duet with Armstrong, displays her greatness to come in "You Won't Be Satisfied (Until You Break My Heart)". Fitzgerald is heard again in a rehearsal capture of Billy Strayhorn's "Chelsea Bridge" with the Duke Ellington Orchestra—a piece of pure gold, not only for the legends in the room, but because of her vocal interpretation of a tune without lyrics. Johnny Hodges, who spent most of his career with Ellington, but who also fronted his own groups from time to time, is represented with his orchestra on "Castle Rock". Out front, his alto tone and creative ideas are a reminder of why his artistry remains an aural mystery, a wonderment never to be reproduced or approached by anyone since.

Vocal contributions to the set are plentiful and mighty, crossing from pop to jazz, including Holiday, Margaret Whiting, Mel Tormé, Bing Crosby, Fred Astaire and Anita O'Day. The latter jazzes up the 1932 ballad "Lullaby of the Leaves", composed by Bernice Petkere (lyrics by Joe Young), once known as the "Queen of Tin Pan Alley", and largely forgotten

today. And speaking of forgotten, Rose Murphy, a pianist-vocalist known for her babyish voice, is represented with "You Were Meant for Me". Other idiosyncratic choices on the collection are the four non-musical cuts: Jack Kerouac (sounding much like *Twilight Zone's* Rod Serling) reciting his observational piece, "The Subterraneans"; an excerpt from a routine by social critic and political satirist Mort Sahl, "The Future Lies Ahead"; a stand-up piece by frequent TV guest Jonathan Winters, "Football Game"; and Shelley Berman's "Department Store", a truly hilarious piece that's a reminder of the comic talent of these OG storyteller comedians.

Pianists are represented by Oscar Peterson ("Tenderly"), Bud Powell ("Like Someone in Love") and Art Tatum, whose staggering ability to insert as many notes and creative ideas as possible into a melody is showcased in "I'll Never Be the Same". Teddy Wilson is paired with Lester Young on "Taking a Chance on Love"; Wilson introduces the melody with sprightly Tatum-esque embellishments before Young enters at the halfway point, taking up the melody with mildly boppish riffs, his tenor smooth and cool. Count Basie and His Orchestra offer "New Basie Blues" and "Thou Swell" (with vocalist Joe Williams): it's pure Basie hard swing. And as the old commercial goes, "Wait! There's more!"—Coleman Hawkins ("Picasso"); Benny Carter ("Flamingo"); Roy Eldridge ("Dale's Wail"); Buddy Rich ("Can't We Be Friends?") and many others, including Charlie Parker, Lionel Hampton, and a supergroup of Dizzy Gillespie, Sonny Rollins and Sonny Stitt performing "On the Sunny Side of the Street" (from their *Sonny Side Up* album recorded in 1957).

This aptly named set, *The Sound of America*, leans heavily into songbook standards, which is a strength, considering the history of the label and the time period encompassed. It is an aural feast, a compilation that will be savored by listeners time and time again.

For more info visit store.ververecords.com. "Verve's 70th Anniversary" is at Central Park Summerstage Sep. 2 (featuring Samara Joy, Christian McBride, Sparklmami, Mei Semones & Friends "Play the Music of Getz/Gilberto" and others). See Calendar.

disparate, carefully delimited musical ecosystems. With 2024's *Miniature America* he began work on a third trilogy, *Boomtown* being the second installment. This new world has a larger population: Jon Irabagon (soprano, tenor), Caroline Davis (alto), Anna Webber (tenor, flute), Jacob Garchik and Kalia Vandever (trombones), Matt Mitchell (piano), Christopher Tordini and Hannah Marks (bass), plus Okazaki and Weiss. The dectet functions less as a big band than a mercurial mixture of small ensembles, wherein individual personalities feature prominently. The local residents seem less prone to grandiose statements than to brief, intimate exchanges with their immediate neighbors. Indeed, many of Okazaki's tunes sound like transcribed conversations with overlapping dialogue, something like a Robert Altman film. We can discern Okazaki's intentions in the morphing themes and intricate rhythmic schemes, yet in this third world, more so than the previous two, the author appears to grant its denizens tacit permission to bend (or even break) rules at whim, such that law and order constantly threaten it to collapse into outlaws and disorder. While this doesn't actually occur, the looming prospect is thrilling.

Weiss' *Unclassified Affections* is a quartet adventure with Okazaki, Peter Evans (trumpet) and Patricia

Brennan (vibraphone). His leadership style is similar to that of Dan Briggs, the original head of TV's *Mission: Impossible* spy squad—a man who favored brains and ingenuity over brawn and bravado. Listening to the record you might not even realize Weiss is heading the mission because, rather than drawing attention to himself, he draws on the diverse strengths of his crack team. Even his extended soliloquy on "Holotype" is a model of decorum and thematic unity, though if you listen closely, the suave shifting of 3-over-4 and 4-over-3 polyrhythms is quite impressive. His compositions are often structured by two- or three-part, radically syncopated counter-lines, each fiercely independent of the others. In the midst of such complexity, Weiss might introduce a basic 4/4 rock pattern with a backbeat, only in this context it won't sound so simple, even as it anchors and organizes the surrounding chaos. Evans—whooping, popping, yodeling, hocketing—is an incessant catalyst, taking his horn down paths less trodden. Okazaki, equally pliant and inventive, sometimes functions as surrogate bassist. Brennan's tolling bell tones, slow tremolos and quicksilver arpeggios generate the warmest waves of the session.

For more info visit pirecordings.com. Weiss and Okazaki are at *The Stone at The New School* Sep. 11 (with

Mitchell). Weiss is at *Smalls* Sep. 21. Okazaki is at *Close Up* Sep. 24 and "The Monkathon: Miles Okazaki plays *Thelonious Monk*" film screening is at *Roulette* Sep. 22. See Calendar.

JAZZ, SEEN

Photographs by Steven Sussman

EXHIBITION OPENING
Thursday, September 10 at 5pm
The Jazz Gallery
1158 Broadway, 5th Fl
New York City, NY 10001

JAZZGALLERY.ORG for more details