



**The Art of Vocalese**  
**Janis Siegel (Origin)**  
**Alto Madness**  
**Amy London (FiveCat)**  
by Marilyn Lester

Vocalese—setting lyrics to jazz instrumentals—has a long but intermittent history. Duke Ellington himself tried it with his 1940 “Cotton Tail”, but vocalese only really gained traction with the 1957 formation of Lambert, Hendricks and Ross (LHR), with ace lyricist Jon Hendricks (who set “Cotton Tail”) becoming the pinnacle of the art. So when Janis Siegel cofounded the Manhattan Transfer (1969) and Amy London formed The Royal Bopsters (2012), could Siegel’s *The Art of Vocalese* and London’s *Alto Madness* be far behind?

The nine-track *The Art of Vocalese* is largely an homage to Siegel’s mentor, Hendricks. The songbook classic “Bye Bye Blackbird”, as reimagined by Hendricks and Miles Davis, is here a gentle swinger that features guest vocalist Raúl Midón, who offers a vocal trumpet solo in the middle section. “In the Presence and Absence of Each Other”, by Claus Ogerman and Michael Brecker and lyricized by Siegel, begins with vocal harmony, then yields to Siegel and tenor saxophonist Wayne Escoffery; percussionist Bobby Sanabria provides a compelling Latin underpinning. For outright fun, Dave Brubeck’s “Unsquare Dance”, with lyrics by the versatile Larry Kerchner, is

performed in a brisk 7/4 time, with an occasional piano riff and a stream of handclaps and hand percussion throughout. Vocals are by Siegel and Lauren Kinhan. Also rhythmically pulsing is the calypso-adjacent Charlie Parker tune, “Barbados”. This foot-tapper is supported by John DiMartino (piano), Lonnie Plaxico (bass) and Vince Cherico (drums). Count Basie gets a hat tip with “Down for Double”, and “It’s Sand, Man” is also a tribute: to dancer Sandman Sims as well as to LHR, who recorded it on their first album in 1957. Siegel takes the lead vocal, with harmonies by Kinhan and original Manhattan Transfer member Laurel Massé. *The Art of Vocalese* also offers vocals from Lea DeLaria and additional musical support from guitarists Frank Vignola and Ed Cherry.

Amy London’s *Alto Madness* features seven songs by Benny Carter and four more written by alto players. London wrote new vocalese passages for three of these tracks: “New York Afternoon”, “How Can You Lose?” and “You Blew Out the Flame in My Heart”. The band—Mike Hashim (alto, tenor), Janice Friedman (piano), Mark McCarron (guitar), Ralph Hamperian (bass), Mike Campenni (drums)—offers solid support, with Ron Horton (trumpet, flugelhorn) present on eight of the album’s tunes. Opener “New York Afternoon”, with Eddie Jefferson’s lyrics supplemented by London’s, features backup from The Royal Bopsters in their only album appearance. Upbeat and percussively driven, the track makes an effective start to the whole—a pleasant exploration of a rhythmically diverse collection with tunes that include standards such as “I’m Glad There Is You”, “Only Trust Your Heart”, “A Kiss from You” and the great Johnny Hodges’ “You Blew Out the Flame in My Heart”, with lyrics by the oft-underated Ervin Drake.

Both albums are fine tributes to the rarefied art of

vocalese; they are destined to be savored by listeners who crave for more, please.

For more info visit [originarts.com](http://originarts.com) and [newworldnjazz.com](http://newworldnjazz.com). Siegel’s album release concert is at Dizzy’s Club Nov. 4. London and Siegel are at Dizzy’s Club Nov. 17 (part of a tribute to Sheila Jordan). See Calendar.



**American Crow**  
**Maria Schneider Orchestra (ArtistShare)**  
by George Kanzler

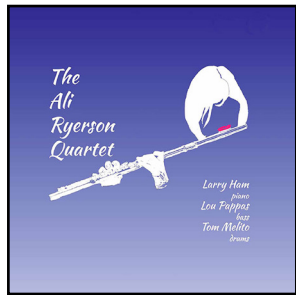
The first half of Maria Schneider’s *American Crow* is the title piece, an engaging, sometimes ravishing, concerto for trumpet (Mike Rodriguez) and jazz orchestra, firmly in the vein of Gil Evans’ collaborations with Miles Davis. Schneider has a marvelous command of the rich textures and harmonic vocabulary developed by Evans (she was for a time his assistant). But around the seventh minute, the ensemble reveals an anxious, tense energy; Rodriguez’ solo skitters off the plangent curve it had been following, emitting frissons of fear and doubt. Things are falling apart musically as is the intent, and then, very convincingly, order is restored and the piece ends as it began. The alternate take that closes out this EP, “American Crow Revisited” begins

with a field recording of crows being attacked by a Cooper’s Hawk (on the original, the trumpets mimic the cries of a hawk). The rest sounds rather similar to the first version, though with a noticeable smidgeon of more angst after that all-significant, seventh minute.

So what exactly is going on? The two readings of “American Crow” (commissioned by Emory University, where it was also premiered) are separated by “A World Lost”, which is a second, shorter concerto, for electric guitar and jazz orchestra. Guitarist Jeff Miles favors long, reverberating, spacy and rock-influenced notes and tones as well as streaks of wah-wah lines; the orchestral sound recalls the Evans-rich moments of “American Crow” while suggesting its more agitated moments.

Substituting a crow for the iconic American bird, the eagle, suggests a political subtext, and the quotations included in the packaging range from the Bible (Proverbs) to Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela to Winston Churchill and Rumi. A video version (highly recommended) on YouTube, shows fuzzy riot scenes during the edgy passage, with pop-up captions proclaiming, “Breaking News.” Political hints? Maybe. The piece was written during Joe Biden’s term in office, immediately following Donald Trump’s first term. Regardless, what we are left with are two highly-enthralling jazz concertos full of gorgeous orchestral writing and spotlighting two distinctive lead soloists. The arresting, unique 7x7-inch cardboard package was designed by Cheri Dorr and features original crow-inspired artwork by renowned artist Aaron Horkey (who is also from Schneider’s hometown of Windom, MN).

For more info visit [mariaschneider.com](http://mariaschneider.com). The Maria Schneider Orchestra is at Birdland Nov. 17-21. See Calendar.



**The Ali Ryerson Quartet**  
**Ali Ryerson (ACR Music)**  
by Ken Dryden

One of a small group of flute players who makes it their primary instrument, Ali Ryerson first gained wide exposure with her recordings for Red Baron and Concord Jazz in the early ’90s. In addition to her later small-group releases, Ryerson was part of the unique three-flute group Flutology with Frank Wess and Holly Hofmann, and she also recorded with her unusual flute big band. For this quartet album, recorded in spring 2025, she is joined by three fellow veterans: Larry Ham (piano), Lou Pappas (bass) and Tom Melito (drums). The leader chose a wide array of music for the session, including a number of originals, many of which are contrafacts of jazz standards heard here in medleys with their sources.

“Chuck’s Tune” is an inspired, intricate reworking of Chuck Wayne’s “Solar”, given a snappy treatment that continuously shifts the focus among the quartet’s band members. The leader’s brisk “Cold Snap” is a spirited original that showcases her gifts as an improviser, while her arrangement of Thad Jones’ “Three and One” spotlights Pappas’ nimble bass, setting up playful, hip flute variations on this timeless melody. Ryerson’s “Flying in Space” is based on one of bassist Steve Swallow’s best-known compositions, “Falling Grace”, and perfectly complements it. Her twisting bop vehicle, “Before Today”, serves as a brief introduction to the standard “Yesterdays”; Ryerson finds seemingly endless variations within her solo, and Ham’s piano work is nuanced and boppish. Brazilian composer Ivan Lins’ “Começar De Novo (Starting Over)”, a canção,

was written as a political statement of hope, following the end of a brutal dictatorship; none the less, it is a natural fit for the flute. Ryerson’s upbeat “AliCat Blues” has a devil-may-care attitude that is hard to ignore. Carlos Lyra, along with Jobim, one of the early singer-songwriter-creators of bossa nova, penned “Nada Como (Ter Amor/Nothing Like Having Love)”, and Ryerson’s engaging arrangement has a snappy groove, giving the rhythm section the ample solo space they deserve.

For more info visit [aliryerson.com](http://aliryerson.com). Ryerson is at La Zingara (Bethel, CT) Nov. 11, *A Place for Jazz* (Schenectady, NY) Nov. 13 and St. Andrew’s Parish (Kent, CT) Nov. 14. See 100 Miles Out.



**EH! (The Electrifying Seamus Blake Plays the Music of Eddie Harris)**  
**Seamus Blake (Cellar Music)**  
by Jeff Cebulski

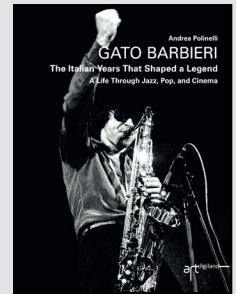
Canadian saxophonist Seamus Blake’s sprawling discography is dominated by exhilarating post-bop excursions, but one thing that sets him apart from his peers is his occasional application of electronic effects, including wah-wah pedal and echoplex. It makes sense that he should tackle the music of Eddie Harris, who introduced the wider public to the possibilities of enhanced tenor saxophone back in the ’60s. On *EH!*, Blake revisits eleven Harris originals, emphasizing the soul-jazz funk that captured the early fusion crowd, while also bringing the music into the present through progressive arrangements featuring Blake’s electrified sax.

The album starts with the Eugene McDaniels song “Compared to What”, which became a hit when it appeared on Harris and Les McCann’s classic live recording *Swiss Movement*. Here, singer Dawn Pemberton’s earnest, soulful delivery lacks McCann’s acerbic sarcasm but clarifies the message, which unfortunately still rings true. Blake adds a wah-wah response and echoed background, with the staunch backing of Sam Yahel (organ), Tim Lefebvre (electric bass) and Corey Fonville (drums). The music then settles into a danceable swing. Two more Harris hits, “Listen Here” and “Mean Greens”, are performed closer to the vest, with a double-tracked Blake jiving and prancing over the rhythm section’s R&B-style support. Pemberton comes alive at the start of “EH Medley”, which ties together “Get On Up and Dance”, “It’s Time to Do What You Want”, “Get on Down”, “Freedom Jazz Dance” and the refreshingly honest, “I Need Some Money”. Fonville’s funky “Jabo” Starks-inspired drumming makes this selection particularly pleasurable. He gets the intro to Harris’ Brazilian-styled “Come Dance With Me”, with Blake on EW1 in juxtaposition to Yahel’s conventional piano. The wah-wah pedal is audibly applied to “Funkorama”, mixing it with what sounds like a Blake vocoded scat on the straight-forward funk display. The leader gives “Illusionary Dreams” a fresh lyric, which he whispers atop Yahel’s warm Fender Rhodes wash, plus lyrical piano.

Although Eddie Harris (whose 30-year deathaversary is this month) is one of the most-sampled jazz artists in hip-hop, his jazz legacy is sometimes overlooked. On *EH!* Seamus Blake demonstrates just how cool and forward-looking Harris was and still is, inviting us to check him out and get funky again.

For more info visit [cellarlive.bandcamp.com](http://cellarlive.bandcamp.com)

## IN PRINT



**Gato Barbieri: The Italian Years That Shaped a Legend – A Life Through Jazz, Pop, and Cinema**  
**Andrea Polinelli (Artdigiland)**  
by Pierre Crépon

Near the end of the ’60s, Gato Barbieri (1932-2016), who would have turned 94 this month (Nov. 28), started to morph into more than a very good tenor player. The Argentinian saxophonist adopted a signature look—wide hat, long hair and scarf—laying the foundations for the kind of distant persona essential to stardom. Barbieri attained a far greater celebrity than most of his ’60s free jazz colleagues, thanks notably to involvement with the film industry (he composed and played on 1972’s *Last Tango in Paris*, starring Marlon Brando). But fame and personas complicate the biographer’s task. In this first book-length work on Barbieri in English, across nearly 500 abundantly-illustrated pages, fellow saxophonist Andrea Polinelli hones in on the decisive years that Barbieri spent in Italy (1962-65), extending research into what preceded them and what they in turn later informed. This is a judicious alternative to the often exhausting genre of overly intensive biographies.

Born Leandro Barbieri in 1932 in Rosario, Argentina, the saxophonist headed to Europe when he was about to turn 30. He had established a solid reputation in Buenos Aires, but there was a limit to what could be done in South America. Italian colleagues describe Barbieri as a pioneer who imported John Coltrane’s still brand-new innovations to the country. Barbieri moved to Paris in 1965, an opportune time when Don Cherry was assembling some of his most important music. The saxophonist contributed to the trumpeter’s masterpieces *Complete Communion* (1966) and *Symphony for Improvisers* (1967), each recorded for Blue Note in the US; this kicked off his New York years as a noted free jazz soloist attracting comparison with Pharoah Sanders (who also played on *Symphony for Improvisers*). Polinelli also chronicles Barbieri’s first attempts at a “Third World” combination of avant garde and Latin American sources, as well as other episodes in his life.

The author constantly multiplies perspectives, using material from research conducted in Argentina and Italy, juggling between extensive print sources, personal interviews and detailed musical analyses. The calm pace of the book is one of its strengths; names and facts are not merely listed but contextualized, and tangents tell us more about important people such as Michelle Barbieri, the saxophonist’s wife and sometime manager, director Gianni Amico and writer and occasional producer Mario Nicolao. People who do not read Italian will undoubtedly learn much about the country’s fascinating larger jazz history.

*Gato Barbieri: The Italian Years That Shaped a Legend* is also a celebratory book; it is possible to disagree with certain assessments, but those disagreements will be informed by the depth of the book itself. Certainly, Andrea Polinelli has found the right way to write about a challenging topic.

For more info visit [gatobarbieribiography.com](http://gatobarbieribiography.com). (The Andrea Polinelli Quartet’s “Gato Barbieri Reloaded” tribute concert is at Blue Note São Paulo, Brazil Nov. 17.)

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