Barron, Joe Lovano, George Garzone, John Scofield, esperanza spalding, McCoy Tyner and others. Over the course of his career, he's become a distinctive, even entrancing, performer.

Born in Cuba in 1968, Mela studied, taught and led bands in his homeland before moving to Boston to study at the Berklee College of Music, where he currently is an associate professor of percussion. He has become a vital part of NYC's downtown scene, and 577 Records has done well at documenting his NYC presence, including a couple of duos with saxophonist Zoh Amba and a pair of prepared piano duets featuring Shinya Lin, as well as three trio recordings with bassist William Parker and guest pianists.

As a performer, Mela bears more than a little similarity to the late Milford Graves (1941-2021)—a pioneer in herbal healing arts, as well as in adventurous improvised music, and whose own career stretched across five decades. Mela and Graves are, of course, exceptional drummers, but on top of that, they're extremely charismatic creators who sometimes draw on Caribbean chants and songs in the midst of percussive exploration. But there's no waiting for enchantment on *Carnaval De Oriente*, Mela's first solo album. It's a musical recreation of the joys of his youth in short, impromptu pieces that have, in a sense, been rehearsed for decades. The album flies by in about a half hour's time, with Mela singing from behind the drum set for the most part, while stacking rhythms more readily felt than counted. The second track, "Nota del Corazón", is built around improvised variations on the (sung) "do, re, mi" scale, with glockenspiel added to the kit.

The album's final selection, "El Canto de Mi Guitarra", is played at the drums with a guitar in hand and with the kind of rawness that brings a smile to the face. His guitar playing echoes familiar styles but is rough, unrehearsed. What makes it work—as always, but especially here—is Mela's commitment to the moment.

For more info visit 577records.com



Inspiration
Yoron Israel (Ronja Music)
by George Kanzler

For drummer-percussionist and polymath Yoron Israel, *Inspiration* is a title with double meaning: his inspirations come from both his life-long experiences in jazz and his profound religious faith. He is Chair of the Percussion Department at Berklee College of Music in Boston, and also Pastor of Music and Art at Destiny Life Center International Church in Brockton, MA. For this album he enlisted two fellow faculty members, Laszlo Gardony (piano) and Rick Peckham (guitar). Rounding out the band are Ian Buss (tenor, soprano), Avery Sharpe (acoustic and electric bass) and Leah Hinton (vocals), while Dennis Montgomery (organ) adds to the gospel flavor on three tracks.

The album is bookended by two especially distinctive pieces: the title track opener, from the pen of Kenny Werner, is a duet between Israel (on vibraphone) and Gardony, which explores a hypnotic vamp at length; Israel's "Nostrand Avenue" is a salute to the Caribbean flavor of Brooklyn's Bed-Stuy neighborhood, propelled by a calypso beat and featuring tandem soloing by Israel and Buss (on tenor). On James Williams' "Black Scholars", Israel demonstrates his fondness for the deeper tones of the drum kit over cymbals. The next five tracks feature vocalist Hinton in a wide variety of settings, ranging from Michael Jackson's "Man in the Mirror" and Israel's gospely "A Brand New Joy", to the standard "There Is No Greater Love", and the sensual bossa nova, "The Island". The bandleader's arrangements showcase Hinton's voice in creative ways: isolating her lyrics over drums or bass on "There Is No Greater Love", or having her croon wordlessly as Buss weaves soprano saxophone lines. "Arina", a tenor and drums feature, precedes Israel's two most ecstatic songs, "It's All About You Lord" and "For God Knows". The vocalist sermonizes mightily on the former track, while on the latter the band pushes the tempo behind Hinton's exhortative vocal.

Inspiration liberally showcases Yoron Israel's talents as a drummer with a singular, deep-toned approach, but also as a creative leader, arranger and composer, equally inspired by his love of jazz and his religious convictions.

For more info visit yoronisrael.com. Israel is at Dizzy's Club Dec. 3-5 (with Mimi Fox). See Calendar.



transient
Lesley Mok (American Dreams)
by Mike Shanley

Lesley Mok compares their solo album, *transient*, to a slow walk through a museum where unknown items unfold as one proceeds. "in the funhouse" fits both that description and its title. A recurring electronic flourish conjures the eerie side of the carnival fixture, the sonic equivalent to images jumping into the walkway or mirrors that twist facial images. Mok's trap kit can be heard in the distance, in the next room perhaps; angelic voices add an unsettling quality when they drop in after a few minutes.

Known primarily as a drummer, Mok uses the unaltered kit sparingly on these seven tracks. Oftentimes, acoustic instruments are electronically manipulated to the extent that they sound like saxophone pads being slapped; and what sounds like tympani rumbles might actually come from a floor tom. These elements often serve as embellishments to the electronic sounds at the forefront of certain tracks. A programmed beat eventually takes shape in opener "berserk", but most selections forego a steady pulse that bobs between the speakers. "view from above" is constructed around a sound that could be a slit drum, albeit one underwater. "midland" calls to mind the sounds of industrial street life that overlap in the wee hours of the night. Many pieces change shape abruptly, midway through. After an intro that suggests Brian Eno's tinny synth work on "2/2" (from *Music for Airports*), "williams landing" cuts to steady piano notes, or a reasonable facsimile thereof, before circling back. In much the same way, "caught in the tides" opens with bouncing Moog-like blips before shifting into long tones. Some electric static colors the background and although no percussion of any sort appears here, the dynamic works perfectly.

In projects with artists such as pianists Marilyn Crispell and Phillip Golub, as well as saxophonist Camila Nebbia, Mok has used the absence of sound as dramatically as sound itself. That approach comes into play on *transient*, provoking curiosity to see where this journey will go.

For more info visit american-dreams.zone. Mok is at Birds Dec. 12 (with Jonathan Reisin) and Brooklyn Public Library Dec. 13 (with Fay Victor). See Calendar.

