GLOBE UNITY







Zeit Zirkel
Christian Finger (Finger Music)
Open Form For Society II
Christian Lillinger (Plaist)
Beyond the Fingertips
Christian Marien Quartett (MarMade)
by Daniel A. Brown

What's in a name? In the case of this month's offerings, three drummers with distinct similarities: first names "Christian" and all German natives. Yet there the commonality in many ways ends. While all three drummer-leaders give their respective side-players generous space to explore and flex, each of these releases is highly personal and stands on its own two feet.

Unna, Germany-born Christian Finger is a longtime habitué of the NYC forward-looking music scene. With *Zeit Zirkel* he and his band—Ralph Alessi (trumpet), Ben Monder (guitar), Vadim Neselovskyi (piano), Adam Armstrong (bass)—collectively explore the titular "time circle." Opener "Alta Anima" is a burnished moment of soft-hued avant-balladry: Neselovskyi and Armstrong offer a hazy, swaying chordal and melodic structure for Alessi and Finger's pointillistic filigrees. "Fifteen PM" strolls along with a syncopated, unpredictable ostinato that seems to shift under the feet of the players, as they trade licks like dance moves. "Wellen Klang" takes the filaments of post '60s explorations and threads them around Alessi's ever-strong chops; while the chiming world of the title track and two solo drum features for Finger offer a ballast to an already impressive release.

If there's a jazz idiom that is the chimera of Stockhausen and Sonny Stitt, yet truly resembling neither, it can be found on *Open Form For Society II*, the sophomore follow-up to Christian Lillinger's 2019 *Open Form For Society* album. This latest from drummer-percussionist-electronicist Lillinger is a dense collection of twenty pieces that captures a wide range of emotions and pursues timbral, structural experiments to stunning effect. The album features Lillinger (drums, electronics), Kaja Draksler (piano), Elias Stemeseder (harpsichord, synthesizer), Georg Vogel (E-Claviton), Anna D'Errico and Cory Smythe (pianos), Robert Landfermann and Jonas Westergaard (basses), Petter Eldh (acoustic and electric bass) and Christopher Dell (vibraphone). Opener "Tarr" rattles, scrapes and vaporizes together like a nebula of percussion and melodic shards, while the atonal clangs of "Topping Abnormal" and "Topping Abnormal II" *just* hint at fractalized themes that seem to ebb and flow in the shadows. The 14-minute "Polioform" is the album's proverbial (and literal) acid test: zipping trails of melody and sound move in a slipstream over Lillinger and Eldh's agitated rhythmic chatter, Dell's vibraphone melodies hurtling over the fray, until the band evicts us from a world we have only barely understood. For adventurous listeners, this project and recording is a worthy trip indeed.

Beyond the Fingertips features a four-piece ensemble exploring both vastness and intimacy with no brakes or second takes. Christian Marien (drums), Tobias Delius (tenor, clarinet), Jasper Stadhouders (guitar) and Antonio Borghini (bass) cut the album direct-to-disc, resulting in two side-long takes recorded without any overdubs. This old-school, minimalist production approach could be a cloying gimmick, but instead results in a tight, fierce album of percolating music. "Love All. Play! / Martha / Blues in Aspik / Cordinale" exemplifies the recording's take-no-prisoners vibe. The band storms in with a manic, five-note motif that gradually dissolves into spatial commentary, shifting into an alien-tongued conversation between Delius and Stadhouders, who are soon joined by Borghini and Marien to push the crescendo into sonic rubble. "Nantucket Nostalgia / For Toby / Look Left, Look Right / No Place for Illusions" deceptively lulls us with dulcet clarinet, before disintegrating into a mix of drum rattles, eerie lines, even scraping sounds, eventually shedding its bizarre chrysalis by the side's end.

For more info visit christianfinger.com, plaist.bandcamp.com and christianmarien.bandcamp.com

half the name's equation), and only the most skilled practitioners can successfully navigate the line between musical self-exploration and adherence to the formula. Now nearing 90 years old, Swiss drummer Pierre Favre is unquestionably—and has historically proven to be—one of them. Favre came of musical age at a time and place where free jazz was flourishing. Switzerland, like much of Western Europe, had embraced the musical experimentation of American free jazz. He mastered the concept of eschewing traditional jazz boundaries while replacing them with limits that may have been more fluid but were nonetheless established.

Together with Swiss producer and trombonist Samuel Blaser, the drummer recently discovered early recordings of his (at the time) new trio. Freshly released as *Bird Food*, the four-track EP finds Favre joined by fellow legends Irène Schweizer (piano) and George Mraz (bass), then known by his Czech birth name, Jiří Mráz. Recorded in 1968, a few months before the group's proper debut of *Santana* (with Peter Kowald for Mraz), the music is characteristically "free," but the trio audibly still operates as a single cohesive unit. Favre's leadership adds a rhythmic cadence to the music not always present on typically saxophone-led American free jazz of the period.

The album opening title track is a cover of the 1959 Ornette Coleman tune. Each member of the trio takes turns standing in for Coleman's saxophone out front, effectively changing the entire texture of the song. This version trades the swing imparted by saxophone in the original for the almost severe tones of Favre and Schweizer, here engaging in a heated duet. The two nevertheless never lose the melody from the original. Mraz also adds a virtuosic, noirish solo in the middle of the track. Schweizer penned the remaining three tracks. "Sounds II" is piano-driven, slow and moody, her playing creepy and disquieting. "Hinten" trades such gloominess for dissonance, the trio playing with fury. "The Attack" closes the EP on its grooviest note, as Favre and Mraz offer something like a swinging rhythm. Rather than contribute a pure melody, Schweizer contrasts the swing with jerky, yet exhilarating piano.

For more info visit blasermusic.com



Extrasensory
Steve Johns (SteepleChase)
by Marilyn Lester

The opening selection of Steve Johns' nine-track *Extrasensory* might well be a statement for the drummer as leader. A short volley of drum/cymbal whacks announces "I'm here and in charge" before tenor saxophonist Troy Roberts takes off into the boppish realm of bassist Joris Teepe's original, "Keep That Smile", a contrafact of "The Shadow of Your Smile". But then, Johns is never far behind throughout the tune with his energetic vamp, as the ensemble—Greg Murphy (piano), John Hart (guitar), Monte Croft (vibraphone, harmonica), Roberts (tenor) and Teepe (bass)—build a gleeful dynamism through progressive solos, to a full-stop ending. The tune is a great introduction to the album's stylistic variety, from ballads to shuffles to swing. The vibraphone-forward reading of Wayne Shorter's "E.S.P.", reharmonized, has a haunting edge and an air of mystery—an appropriate theme song for an album entitled *Extrasensory*.

Four of the tracks are Johns originals: "Lava", "Murray Avenue", "Wild Kingdom" and "Hope". The pianism of "Lava" bubbles as if molten; the leader's drumming builds rolling heat as the ensemble's fast rhythmic flow drives to a definitive conclusion. The relaxed tempo and laid-back cadences of "Hope" evoke Vince Guaraldi's Charlie Brown soundtracks; it's gentle, cheerful and filled with an element of childlike wonder, and isn't that awfully hopeful. A sturdy bass feature affixes a happy face to the proceedings. On Hart's "Rhapsodia", based on "I Hear a Rhapsody", the guitarist plays fluid single-note lines; Roberts answers with an uptempo, boppish improvisation. The closer, Dave Mason's "Feelin' Alright" (a hit for singer Joe Cocker), moves into serious funk territory, with Johns overdubbing congas. There's also singing and Croft's chromatic harmonica. The groove is a Monty Pythonesque "and now for something completely different," perhaps a little jarring, compared to the relative tranquility of the previous tracks.

Overall, the synergy evident in *Extrasensory* prevails. The tunes are dynamic and inventive and played by a group of musicians who share a common vibe. Johns is a canny leader, giving his players collaborative freedom and support, but also knowing when and how to step into the spotlight.

For more info visit steeplechase.dk. Johns is at The Django Dec. 18 and Midnight Blue Dec. 21 (both with Dave Stryker) and Smalls Dec. 25-26 (with Waldron Mahdi Ricks). He is also at Beanrunner Café (Peekskill, NY) Dec. 19 (with Jeff Barone). See Calendar and 100 Miles Out.

