DROP THE NEEDLE



Pneuma
Henry Fraser (Kou)
by Sarah "Flake" Grosser

Bassist Henry Fraser has managed to develop a signature timbre of exceptional darkness. For the majority of *Pneuma*, he layers multiple takes of alternative bass techniques in a careful blend of resonances. The illusion is that all sounds are played in a single take and on a single harmonic instrument. The result is a totally-immersive, viscerally-satisfying collection of eight homogenous pieces, averaging around four and a half minutes each. The overtones and sustain carry the album, inviting listeners to dispense with their preconceived notions of what solo double bass music is supposed to sound like.

"Blood, is" showcases sharp, ominous creaks slowly oscillating between left and right channels. You can feel the splintery, spiky high frequencies of each individual crack—tactile and kinetic, like a hundred-year-old tree finally breaking and falling. In "Turn", drawn-out bowing is paired with harmonics to create devastating, stirring chords. The melodies that appear through the harmonics are simple, but these are complemented by the complexity of the sounds that Fraser creates. There is also a great respect for silence, and the negative space between each articulation. Deep listening is essential.

This album could be summarized with the usual descriptors—"modern contemporary, experimental avant garde, partially composed, partially improvised"—but that might limit the appeal to a select niche. This recording certainly has crossover appeal in other genres outside of the jazz world: it would be of particular interest to fans of drone or dramatic instrumental scores. Co-producers Randall Dunn (Sunn O))) and Ben Greenberg (Marc Ribot) have realized Fraser's vision with a clear unity of purpose. The design team at Kou have similarly knocked it out of the ballpark with two limited-edition variants: the "Cohort" edition on mint-colored vinyl, and the exquisite "Gemstone" edition, featuring a beautiful translucent violet and orange melt, plus signed graphic scores!

Pneuma is for connoisseurs of impeccable sound (and graphic) design, richly textural sonic palettes and attention to the very tiniest of details. It may be a solo record, but it's a team effort—one of 2026's darkest horses.

For more info visit kourecords.com. Fraser is at Close Up Dec. 6 (with Sam Weinberg) and Dec. 11 (as leader). See Calendar.



Passerine
Stephan Crump (Out Of Your Head)
by JR Simon

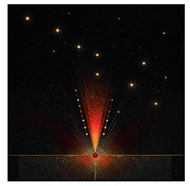
With *Passerine*, bassist Stephan Crump presents seven original compositions that are subtle, restrained and intricate. He is joined by frequent collaborator Ches Smith (drums, percussion), Kenny Warren (trumpet) and David Leon (alto, flute); together, the musicians share an instinctive understanding of how much, and how little, to play.

"Glide" is an album standout. Its lilting bass figure supports intertwining trumpet and flute, which enter at slightly offset intervals. Although it is inspired by the different ways birds build nests, the music avoids literal references, though little flutters and swoops emerge in the phrasing (Crump has made the scores available for purchase, and they include evocative directions such as "swooping" and "horns flit around.") The interplay between Warren and Leon is particularly effective throughout. Crump makes generous use of their overlapping registers, allowing their complementary timbres to blend and resonate. Slight rhythmic offsets and staggered entrances add surprise, keeping the music moving without disturbing its unhurried character. On "Weavers", trumpet and flute interlace, weaving the melody together, supported by a crisp groove from Crump and Smith.

The album puts the Crump-Smith partnership on full display. On "Twenty-Five", their opening exchange moves through an astonishing range of textures and subtle rhythmic shifts, each musician anticipating and extending the other's ideas. Smith's playing is built from small, finely-tuned gestures. On "Stuck", he catches Warren's double-tonguing trumpet line with a delicate cymbal response. It's a fleeting moment, and one of many that rewards repeated listening. Across the album, Smith's diverse palette of strikes, brushes and textures seems as natural as breathing. He is, quite simply, a generational talent.

"Bryn" and "Fly" further demonstrate Crump's melodic gifts. On the former, trumpet and alto saxophone occupy shared tessituras, creating an especially gorgeous blend; the latter selection has a memorable, open-ended melody that invites other musicians to make it their own. *Passerine* has plenty of rhythmic life, but no one is in a hurry. The music beautifully unfolds on its own terms.

For more info visit outofyourheadrecords.com. Crump's Passerine is at Bar Bayeux Dec. 12. His Otherlands Trio (with Darius Jones and Eric McPherson) is at SEEDS Brooklyn Dec. 16-18. Crump is also at The Stone at The New School Dec. 5 (with Patricia Brennan). See Calendar.



Points of Light
Christian McBride & Ursa Major (Mack Avenue)
by Terrell K. Holmes

Over the years, bassist Christian McBride has evolved from a promising young lion to an acclaimed bandleader and composer, and now he has become a mentor to the current pride of young lions. McBride has released *Points of Light* with his quintet Ursa Major, a vibrant, diverse blend of traditional and contemporary musical influences.

"Sakura", by tenor saxophonist Nicole Glover, is an impressionistic prelude, driven by her warm, reflective tone, in addition to McBride's vigorous electric bass line and the measured drumming of Savannah Harris. The quick-witted "Two Check" is a classic bop delight, pitch perfect, with standout turns by McBride, whose pizzicato sounds like scat singing, and killin' work by composer Mike King's piano and organ. When the band recorded "Cows" by guitarist Ely Perlman, the bandleader likely told everyone to let loose, and the result is shoulder-weaving funk. The bridge, built by the composer's deft guitar riffs, Glover's blues-framed tenor and King's nasty-ass organ, taps into McBride's James Brown pedigree. The texture and warmth of Harris' "Same Folks", as well as the thoughtful interplay within the band, makes the song as calm and soothing as an oasis.

McBride's propulsive "Familiar Steps" prompts a reasonable question: does jazz need yet *another* contrafact of Coltrane's "Giant Steps"? The answer here is a resounding *yes*. McBride's take-no-prisoners acoustic solo acknowledges Coltrane's virtuosity while underscoring his own. Similarly, Glover could have fallen victim to emulation but instead constructs a flawless statement that swings effortlessly. "A Morning Story" is a "quiet storm" type of ballad, with the saxophonist's soft eloquence and Perlman's spare, luminous guitar at its heart. Another King tune, "Orquieda", whose opening keyboard riffs bring prime Stevie Wonder to mind, is a Latin-tinged workout that's light-hearted, joyful and conducive to dancing. The album ends with a tip of the hat to keyboardist George Duke with a cover of his tune "No Rhyme, No Reason". The excellent arrangement and instrumentation, as well as the vocoder accompaniment, creates an enmeshing sound that one might find in the Pat Metheny/Lyle Mays catalog.

McBride has struck gold again with Ursa Major, and it will be unsurprising if *Points of Light* is heralded as a landmark album, not only because of its leader, but because of the stellar careers it furthered.

For more info visit mackavenue.com. McBride is at Village Vanguard Dec. 1-6 and 8-13. See Calendar.



Live in Italy
Jonah Parzen-Johnson & Lau Nau (We Jazz)
by Wif Stenger

High concept: New Yorker with baritone sax meets Finn with vintage modular synth for an hour of meditative improv in the Italian Alps! Back story: a year ago, jazz-based Brooklyn saxophonist Jonah Parzen-Johnson and multi-instrumentalist, vocalist and sound artist Lau Nau (Laura Naukkarinen) released their subtle debut, *A Few We Remember*, now reissued together with this live set, expanding on five pieces from the original eight.

The compositions were inspired by random encounters with near-strangers. This project, too, started as an encounter between new acquaintances with different musical backgrounds and tools—yet their acoustic and electronic instruments dovetail naturally into a warm, flowing, open dialogue. Both recordings are minimalist affairs: Parzen-Johnson drops his earlier electronic treatments and spoken-word schtick for this project, while Lau Nau skips the field sounds, water drops and toy sound effects of her experimental solo works (she only adds gentle, wordless vocals on one tune, the nearly ambient "First Time Viewer").

The original recordings are jumping-off points for thoughtful, low-key improvisations. Some tunes stretch to more than twice their original length, such as the closing "Suspicious Commuter", a contemplative stream of consciousness played mostly on saxophone with faint echoes and rain-like effects. The track ends with the only audience sounds of the set, the crowd in the small northern Italian club otherwise pin-drop quiet. Indeed, this set sounds like it could have been recorded in a studio, while the original "studio" album was in fact mostly recorded at Lau Nau's old wooden house in the Finnish archipelago.

Both versions share an enveloping, inviting sound that only occasionally veers into edginess, as on the paradoxically titled "Calming Influencer", which sounds more menacing live. Much more calming is "Bus Driver", Naukkarinen's hypnotic synth resembling an electric church organ stuck on an entrancing loop—imagine Philip Glass moonlighting at a Vegas wedding chapel. On "Apologetic Inquirer", Parzen-Johnson's playing is elegant, slow-motion bebop. This time the duo's collaboration is much richer and more florid than the album version, making it sound like a demo in comparison—a worthy goal for any live album.

For more info visit wejazz.fi. Parzen-Johnson is at Baby's Alright Dec. 14 (with Knife Thrower). See Calendar.



Comprehensive
Joe Morris, Tyshawn Sorey, Peter Evans (Fundacja Słuchaj)
by Fred Watts

There's a closeness to the music on *Comprehensive*—a front-row seat, raw feeling. The album's four undulating, explorative group improvisations by Peter Evans (trumpet), Joe Morris (bass) and Tyshawn Sorey (drums) are captured in extraordinary sonic detail by engineer Aaron Nevezie at The Bunker Studio in Brooklyn, giving the album that "in the room" feeling that is a critically-important part of experiencing free music.

On each track, an overarching structure reveals itself despite the contrast from one moment to the next. This effect is due largely to Sorey's role in the trio. His marked patience establishes a foundation that his bandmates build upon, which also grounds the temporal reality of the listener. In the first three minutes of "Grasp", the drummer establishes a continuous pulse on the ride cymbal. Evans and Morris gradually build on this rhythmic consistency; all the while, the clarity of the cymbal attacks fade into a wash. Sorey's tasteful commitment to ideas, and his bandmates' willingness to join in on them throughout the record, are commendable and integral to the music's success.

One hallmark of this album is the trio's exploration of softer, sparser sounds. In the final five minutes of "Surroundings", each musician's technical control and creativity reach a point where the listener may lose track of individual players: they become a sort of macroorganism. Particularly notable is Evans' use of trumpet as a textural device, which can blend with a cymbal scrape or bass harmonic to bewildering effect. The opening of "Each of These Things" has something of an industrial quality to it. One could mistake the band for the whirring and clanking of tools, with Evans' playing akin to the incidental resonances heard in a machine shop. For the listener experiencing this album while in transit, the music ultimately has a matching, transportive quality.

For more info visit sluchaj.bandcamp.com. Evans is at Close Up Dec. 4-6 and Firehouse 12 (New Haven, CT) Dec. 18 (with Dan Weiss). Sorey is at The Jazz Gallery Dec. 16-19. See Calendar and 100 Miles Out.



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National Jazz Museum in Harlem
58 West 129th St., 6PM

12/14 - Monday Night Jam
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National Jazz Museum in Harlem*
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