



Discoverers Cargo Cult (CIMP)
Noisy Love Songs (for George Dyer) Okkyung Lee (Tzadik)
Inner Landscape Daniel Levin (Clean Feed)
 by John Sharpe

It wasn't until he broke his arm in 1949 that bassist Oscar Pettiford became a jazz pioneer on the cello. He experimented with its smaller cousin, which he could play even with his arm in a sling and performed and recorded on it for the rest of his career. But not until the '60s New Thing did the cello properly find its place. Today the cello plays second fiddle to no one, especially on the three discs at hand.

Cellist Tomas Ulrich leads the string trio Cargo Cult through their fourth outing on *Discoverers*. Lauded for his ability to bridge the jazz and classical worlds, Ulrich goes even further here, bringing a finely honed improvisational sensibility to the table. Bassist Michael Bisio and guitarist Rolf Sturm have similarly wide ranging tastes and firmly sublimate their abundant technique to the needs of the music. This predominantly tuneful set sounds like three friends having fun, demonstrating a mutual love of melody. Bisio proves a surefooted anchor, buoying up the ensemble but blending the lithe and the lyric in his features, particularly a fine pizzicato spot on "A New Day". Sturm fits right in, whether cleverly inserting Morse code suggestions into the spiky swing of "To Birds" or milking the high drama of "Oil". A democratic ethos manifests through shared writing credits, elegant interplay and ample solo room. On "Mixed Emotions" the leader partakes of a darkly abrasive and animated arco duet with Bisio while the extreme register murmurings of "Walking Through Those Shadows" unfurl into an appropriately mournful three-part counterpoint before a series of anguished variations. Bisio's "History of a Mystery: H. floresiensis" moves from violent to ruminative, concluding a pastoral idyll with a sweetly lilting theme.

Strings also loom large on *Noisy Love Songs*, as cellist Okkyung Lee unveils a program that focuses as much on compositional structures as the unfettered explosions for which she is better known. Though monster improvisers like Craig Taborn and Peter Evans are on board, their contributions are used sparingly and with surprising restraint, as part of a revolving cast. "Danji" is a mercurial pas-de-deux for Taborn's crystalline piano and Lee's swooping cello while "Saeya Saeya" adds Evans to the mix in an exchange of smeary gesture. Those two improvisations apart, most of the pieces juxtapose simple interlocking rhythmic devices with layers of electronic effects or wilder individual expression. The overall effect is accessible and intriguing, exemplified by the opening "One Hundred Years Old Rain (The Same River Twice)" where the serene beauty derived from the intersections of trumpet and strings is underpinned by crackling electronics and sounds evocative of dawn in a rainforest. Elsewhere, Cornelius Dufallo's violin and Christopher Tordini's bass join Lee in a string trio on "Upon A Fallen Tree", anchored by a two-note pizzicato motif while "White Night" comes on like a concerto for Satoshi Takeishi's exotic percussion.

Finally on *Inner Landscapes* we are left with the cello alone. On his first solo record, Daniel Levin allows his imagination to run riot over the course of six improvisations from a brace of live dates captured during 2009. In the liners Levin describes his intention

that the music be "casual but very determined" and he fulfills that wish through an impressive focus on weight, line, dynamics and overall direction. On the way he invokes all manner of musics with prodigious skill: jazz, classical, improv, noise, vocal chorus. But nowhere are the references sustained as he restlessly pursues an unceasing inner flow, which makes blow-by-blow description thankless. Contrasts and jump-cuts abound, with ideas picked up, examined and discarded in favor of newer routes all within the space of a few minutes. Some moments stand out in relief: a passage of plaintive cries pitched against dark grainy slashes; a litany of multi-layered abrasions; a sequence of descending chuckles in contrasting registers. But in practice the six tracks are all of a piece. His technique is unquestioned and he revels in the physicality of the instrument. Those with an adventurous streak or interest in the outer reaches of the cello universe will find much to savor.

For more information, visit cimprecords.com, tzadik.com and cleanfeed-records.com. Lee is at Central Park Summerstage Jul. 15th-16th, I-Beam Jul. 29th with James Falzone and The Stone Jul. 30th with William Winant. Levin is at The Stone Jul. 1st, Downtown Music Gallery Jul. 2nd and Jazz Gallery Jul. 9th with Matana Roberts. See Calendar.



Live at Smalls
Bruce Barth Trio
 (smallsLIVE)

by George Kanzler

Pianist Bruce Barth has been a reliable fixture on the postbop/hardbop scene in the Big Apple since the early '80s. In the quintet Bopitude, his strong touch and attack are ideally suited to stand up and be heard in assertive company. His trio work is rarer and the set captured at Smalls features him not only as leader but also as the composer of eight of the nine tracks.

Live at Smalls is extremely well paced and programmed for a live CD. It begins with the midtempo "Oh Yes I Will", almost a warmup displaying Barth's fluidity and easy swing. "Sunday" hints at a churchy 6/8 in its flextime opening, then picks up steam as Barth digs into block chords before settling back into the melody with hints of waltz-time. On his meditative, delicately pealing solo on "Yama", the mood is enhanced by Rudy Royston's mallets over Vicente Archer's bass. "Almost Blues", an AAB blues with an extended B-section, finds Barth developing lines with a conviction akin to that of late blues piano master Ray Bryant. "Peaceful Place" successfully combines ringing tones with an insistent bass ostinato and earthy two-hand chords. "Afternoon in Lleda" features extended rubato and lyrical solo piano interludes. "Wilsonian Alto", a reference to Barth's frequent collaborator alto saxophonist Steve Wilson, is proto-funk with sprung rhythms and deep grooves. Barth sidles into the melody of "Good Morning Heartache" rubato, his improvisation flowing out of it. Flexible and sprung rhythms also animate the closer, "Looking Up".

Barth's piano provides a strong chordal anchor for *Michael Benedict & Bopitude*. Benedict, unlike some drummer-leaders, doesn't loom over the proceedings. He's a team player and provides a variety of tempos and approaches, ie, sticking to brushes throughout "Joy Spring", which keep the music fresh. Selections range from the familiar ("Moanin'", Dexter Gordon's "Cheese Cake" and Kenny Dorham's "Whistle Stop")



Eponymous
Michael Benedict & Bopitude
 (Planet Arts)

to James Williams' loping, long-toned tune "Alter Ego" and Bobby Watson's boogaloo march "Heckle and Jeckle". Chris Pasin, a trumpeter who has recently emerged again on the scene after decades of obscurity, brings his distinctive, cliché-free voice to the proceedings and Brian Patneau's tenor sax fills the hardbop mold admirably. Bassist Mike Lawrence and Benedict keep the time crisp and exhilarating. A highlight is a diaphanous, haunting and multi-tempoed version of Grachan Moncur III's "Frankenstein".

For more information, visit smallslive.com and planetarts.org. Barth is at The Kitano Jul. 1st-2nd with Jerry Bergonzi, Smalls Jul. 19th and 92nd Street Y Jul. 20th. See Calendar.

UNEARTHED GEM



Flashpoint: NDR Jazz Workshop (April '69)
John Surman (Cuneiform)
 by Jeff Stockton

In 1969 Brit saxist John Surman invited some of his mates to Germany to tape a TV show for North German Broadcasting in Hamburg. A mind-blowing gathering of the cream of British jazz musicians plus two Austrian guests, *Flashpoint* (a two-disc DVD/CD set) serves as an essential historical document as well as a vital performance, which, aside from the turtlenecks, hairstyles and black and white cinematography, is as fresh as last week.

In his informative liner notes, Brian Morton asserts that Surman and his crew probably learned much of what they knew from records and since the first notes we hear are a brief Harry Miller bass vamp, the LP that quickly comes to mind is Coltrane's *Africa/Brass*. Piano and drums pick up the rhythm, the horns (led by clarion trumpeter Kenny Wheeler) take up the cause and Surman sculpts a particularly burly and rough-hewn solo on soprano. Three of the five cuts are Surman compositions, but he tends to give the solo spotlights to his band. Altoist Mike Osborne is fleet and aggressive on "Mayflower". On his own "Puzzle", Erich Kleinschuster blows limpid trombone in contrast to Malcolm Griffiths' busy, bursting energy that challenges the structural integrity of his horn. Tenor Ronnie Scott's smooth solo gives way to Surman's soprano on pianist Fritz Pauer's "Gratuliere", a tune reminiscent of Coltrane's version of "Inch Worm".

The set closes with the title track, commencing with a raucous overlapping fanfare. Surman's bari sits down below and Osborne screeches on top, Griffiths plunges the bell of his horn like mad and Pauer pounds the keys with the heels of his hands. Osborne takes the first solo, even more aggressively than before. When Alan Skidmore (who had previously been a revelation on "Once Upon a Time") takes over on tenor, looking like Joe Henderson with his thick moustache and horn-rimmed glasses, he builds his story-telling solo to an ecstatic high before the action falls and dovetails right into Surman's energized baritone feature. It's the program's final leap-from-your-chair moment, some of the best that British jazz had to offer. Decades later, Surman has left a sterling legacy.

For more information, visit cuneiformrecords.com