

7 x 7

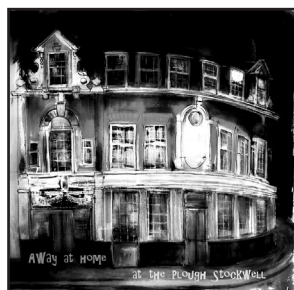
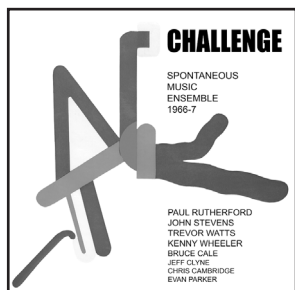
Brooklyn Jazz Underground Ensemble (BJU Records)
by Tom Greenland

The Brooklyn Jazz Underground (BJU), formed in 2006, is an association of independent bandleaders. 7 X 7, their second collective release, puts all of the chiefs/chefs in the kitchen at once, containing two compositions from each member: one a full-length work, the second a briefer piece (called a “shorty”) inspired by one of the longer tunes. Thus the album displays a range of compositional approaches and musical personalities.

Although vocalist Tammy Scheffer sings lyrics on the clever “Ex-Communication”, more often she’s heard as a third horn, in combination with David Smith’s trumpet and Adam Kolker’s tenor or soprano saxophones or bass clarinet. The three-at-a-time frontline soloing is particularly effective on pieces like bassist Anne Mette Iversen’s “Along the Lines”, where voice, bass clarinet and trumpet combine in a variety of melodic textures. The double-drum team of Owen Howard and Rob Garcia provides propulsion, adding a dynamic cadenza to the end of the aforementioned tune or opting for Middle Eastern hand-drum patterns on “Our Last Hora”. The two-chord country gospel sound of “The Green Pastures of Brooklyn” was obviously inspired by “Cowboys and Indians”, a longer saga that morphs from a loping cowboy bassline in 5/4 time to a second section in 6/8 with a Middle Eastern-style melodic scale—a musical metaphor, perhaps, for the drastically different experiences of Native North Americans and their white colonizers.

The BJU gave the second of two local CD release parties at ShapeShifter Lab last month, headlining an evening that also featured Scheffer and Garcia’s groups. In spite of a house sound-mix dominated by the twin-drum onslaught at the expense of the piano and lacking clear separation between the frontline instruments, the septet delivered a dynamic set, which included almost all of the longer pieces and a couple of the shorties. “Ex-Communication” had an effective three-way solo by voice, tenor saxophone and trumpet. As on the album, “Along the Lines” and “Cowboys and Indians” were strong performances, the second featuring pianist David Cook, who also took a forceful, McCoy Tyner-esque solo over “Someone’s Blues”.

For more information, visit bjurecords.com



Spontaneous Music Ensemble (Eyemark-Emanem)
Challenge (1966-7)
Away at Home (At the Plough Stockwell)
Away (Loose Torque)
by Andrey Henkin

British drummer John Stevens, who died 20 years ago this month at the age of 54, had a remarkable sessionography, not just in terms of sheer number but also in variety. He began, as most English musicians did, playing traditional, perhaps derivative, American-

style jazz before exploding with like-minded peers into a unique amalgam (to borrow the name of a band in which Stevens took part) of jazz, improvised music and highly conceptual performance. The tragedy of his death was that as the decades went by Stevens was working more—and more diversely.

The Spontaneous Music Ensemble (SME) was Stevens’ main vehicle for most of his career, though the name could refer to a small group, large ensemble or even duo. For the group’s debut *Challenge*, recorded in March 1966 and reissued here from the original Eyemark LP with a 15-minute bonus track recorded 11 months later, Stevens is joined by Kenny Wheeler (flugelhorn), Paul Rutherford (trombone), Trevor Watts (alto and soprano saxophones) and either Bruce Cale or Jeff Clyne (piano), all familiar names to anyone with even a passing understanding of British jazz. Stevens, Watts and Rutherford wrote the material and the forms are expansive, doing a great deal to the earlier work of Shake Keane and Joe Harriott as well as Ornette Coleman (who has a dedication in “2.B.Ornette”). With nearly 50 years of hindsight, the music is neither too challenging nor that spontaneous (though consider the era in which it was made) but that doesn’t mean it isn’t excellent and well deserved of reissue. The bonus track with Watts (piano, alto saxophone), Evan Parker (soprano saxophone) and Chris Cambridge (bass) is far more prescient of Stevens’ work over the next decade.

Away at Home is a recently unearthed session from the archives of bassist Nick Stephens and released on his Loose Torque imprint. Home refers to The Plough, Stevens’ regular haunt from 1976-80 while *Away* was a 1975 project originally with Watts, electric guitarist Steve Hayton and electric bassist Peter Cowling. A year later and the lineup had changed and expanded to one close to this 70-minute August 1978 concert: Stephens, Robert Carter (saxophones), John Corbett (trumpet) and Nigel Moyses and Martin Holder (guitar). The music is joyous and obviously electric, closer in spirit to what was produced by the South African contingent in London’s “What’s That”, which appears twice—was inspired by trumpeter Mongezi Feza, who had died the year earlier) than the SME or Stevens’ other more cerebral projects. The throbbing rhythms—Stevens’ drumming like mad—paired with the sometimes complex and other times in friendly opposition guitars and vibrant horns make this one of Stevens’ most accessible recordings. But that word belies the strong concept present throughout, a hallmark of all the drummer’s projects.

For more information, visit loosetorque.com and emanemdisc.com



JASS
John Hollenbeck/Alban Darche/Sebastien Boisseau/ Samuel Blaser (YOLK Music)
by Terrell Holmes

JASS, a pun and acronym, is the name of a quartet comprised of drummer John Hollenbeck, tenor saxophonist Alban Darche, trombonist Samuel Blaser and bassist Sebastien Boisseau. They are all among the most inventive and exciting players and composers on the scene and they display their first-call skills on their self-titled debut. The vibe is self-assured, frequently easygoing—and deceptive. The band brings an intriguing complexity to their music.

Darche and Blaser’s soft contrapuntal swinging tempers the moodiness of “Recurring Dreams”. The

collusion of Hollenbeck’s arresting AfroCuban-inspired percussion and Boisseau’s thoughtful plucking enliven the ballad “Saj’s”. It takes a thorough understanding of a genre to comment on it ironically without one’s audience missing the joke; “Jazz Envy” cleverly embraces the avant garde sentiment while appearing to dismiss it. Blaser, who sounds like he’s playing Dixieland in a carnival funhouse of mirrors, underscores the irony. There’s more mercuriality on “Water”, an initially brooding tune that blossoms into a whinnying military strut. “Limp Mint” is a delightful if straight-faced suite and listening to “Driving License” is like watching an art collective fill a canvas, Jackson Pollock style, with splashes of color. The influence of Ornette Coleman is prevalent on this album but it’s in bas-relief on “It Began to Get Dark”.

Every song on JASS has something that will catch the listener by surprise. And given what each member brings to the table, that’s not surprising. The breadth and propulsive force of Hollenbeck’s percussion is awe-inspiring. Boisseau’s steadiness and resonance keeps things centered and his playing has a richness and complexity as formidable as his bandmates. And no band has a pair of more sure-handed horn players than Blaser and Darche. Their horns grouse, debate, harmonize, shadow each other. JASS challenges, celebrates and, in its own way, defines the spirit of jazz. It could be one of the bands that will play a prominent role in moving jazz forward in its latest stage of evolution and hopefully will prevent this great music from dying the death that it has reportedly been dying for the past 50 years.

For more information, visit yolkrecords.com. Hollenbeck is at ShapeShifter Lab Sep. 25th with Claudia Quintet and Anna Webber. See Calendar.



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