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Ten Years After

A decade into her remarkable career, Norah Jones moves in a stylish new direction

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Grégoire Maret

OnDisc Summer Variations

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Following in the “tootsteps” of the venerable

Toots Thielemans, **Grégoire Maret** is poised to make his mark among the relatively small fraternity of jazz-harmonica virtuosi.

Now in his mid-30s,

the Swiss musician has just released his self-titled debut recording for the eOne label. Trained at the New School University in New York City, Maret established himself as a first-call player, whose talents were sought by headliners from Youssou N’Dour and Meshell Ndegeocello to David Sanborn and Cassandra Wilson. He subsequently toured and recorded with the Pat Metheny Group and the bands of Marcus Miller and Herbie Hancock. For his debut recording, Maret dips into the songbooks of important influences such as Metheny, Chick Corea, Milton Nascimento and Stevie Wonder, whose chromatic-harp sound is reflected in his own blowing. Former employers Miller and Wilson show their esteem for the har-



monica ace with guest spots on his album, and Thielemans blesses Maret by performing a duo with his young compatriot. The emotionally shifting “Lucilla’s Dream,” our selection, showcases Maret’s wistful-to-joyful sound, as he engages with his superb quartet of pianist Federico Gonzalez Peña, bassist James Genus and drummer Clarence Penn.

The musical partnership of **Hristo Vitchev** and **Weber Iago** has produced rich and evocative results. On the heels of their quintet recording *The Perperikon Suite*, reviewed elsewhere



in this issue, the guitarist and the pianist have just released their second duet recording, *Heartmony* (First Orbit Sounds). Once again, Bay Area-based guitarist Vitchev called on his Vancouver-based colleague to interpret his very personal-sounding music. “The 11 compositions presented here are the

most honest and direct message I have ever let out of my heart,” the Bulgarian-born Vitchev writes in the liner notes. And that’s not hard to believe, as the pair wend their way through the sometimes melancholy, sometimes exuberant expressions. Vitchev alternates acoustic and electric instruments and displays a strong Metheny influence on both. Despite its title, don’t look for echoes of Monk’s “Crepuscle for Nelly” on the lovely “Crepuscular Rays,” or its brief prelude, which we’ve included here. Instead, the pair evoke the warm colors of twilight painting the evening sky.

Pioneers of acid jazz and neo-soul, the U.K.’s **Incognito** continue to craft superbly funky tracks with bright horns and big vocal performances. On their latest recording, *Surreal* (Shanachie), founding member, guitarist and producer Jean-Paul “Bluey” Maunick calls on the vocal



JAZZIZ ON DISC is a 2-CD music compilation from the artists of yesterday, today and tomorrow, bundled in the subscriber copies of the print editions of JAZZIZ Magazine. This issue’s theme is “Piano Variations and Summer Variations.” Disc One contains a selection of songs by prominent pianists. Disc Two is a collection of music drawn from recently released albums.

tion seamlessly. The performances on this two-disc set reflect the personalities of both the composer and a large, revolving cast of players. For example, it's often impossible to distinguish between written and improvised melodies in the sextet pieces "No Exercise" and "The Fugue No. 2."

"Love in the Middle of the Air," an astonishing duet for vocalist Dee Dee Bridgewater and bassist Reggie Workman, vacillates naturally between composed and improvised passages. Abstract yet lyrical, structured yet remarkably free-flowing, Stadler's pieces take many of the players in directions they never pursued elsewhere. Trumpeter Jimmy Owens seems especially inspired by the challenging music on the sextet tracks. And Tyrone Washington, who achieved fame as a fusion saxophonist, plays with unsuspected fire and intricacy.

A European big band performs a previously unreleased arrangement of Russ Freeman's "Bea's Flat," and features vivid solos from trombonist Albert Mangelsdorff, trumpeter Manfred Schoof and saxophonist Gerd Dudek. When the album was originally issued, the jazz world wasn't ready for what was then a novel concept — the music of one composer, and an unknown one at that, played by several different ensembles. Even with the presence of heavy hitters like Joe Chambers and Workman, it was likely a tough sell. However, judging by the recent critical acclaim for *Brains on Fire*, and the 2011 reissue of Stadler's *A Tribute to Monk and Bird*, the jazz world may be ready now. —Ed Hazell

Mary Halvorson Quintet

Bending Bridges
(Firehouse 12)

Mary Halvorson's music is tough to pin down.



Jazz, avant-garde rock, punk and classical are all in evidence.

The guitarist's second disc with her quintet, *Bending Bridges*, is even more adventurous than their previ-

ous outing, 2010's excellent *Saturn Sings*.

The only constant is Halvorson's relentless experimentation, both as a musician and a composer. Her aggressive picking technique results in spiky, Marc Ribot-like solos and sharp-edged, crunchy chords. And

she loves to warp the sound of her guitar in unusual ways, such as the spooky, B-movie effects she coaxes on "The Periphery of Scandal." Her compositions are obviously abstract, with disjointed melodies, harmony that always seems in flux and rhythms that suddenly fall apart and reconfigure. Even the titles of her songs, which are also numbered, command extra attention. "Deformed Weight of Hands" starts as hard-charging experimental rock, briefly settles into a mellow jazz groove then explodes in a barrage of free improvisation.

But the proceedings also bear a strange beauty. The opening moments of "Sea Cut Like Snow" exude a chamber-like delicacy, with trumpeter Jonathan Finlayson and alto saxophonist Jon Irabagon delivering their most fluid lines on the disc. On "That Old Sound," Halvorson bends chords and single notes to create a sustained atmosphere of mystery. And there's often a compelling contrast in the jagged forms that Halvorson, bassist John Hébert and drummer Ches Smith play on top of the fairly tight horn arrangements.

Bending Bridges won't be to everyone's liking. Some of it, to be sure, is downright unsettling. But venturesome listeners will likely find themselves intrigued at first, then going back for more. —John Frederick Moore

Phronesis

Walking Dark
(Edition)

The title of Phronesis' latest recording alludes



to concerts the European three-piece has played in total darkness. Their performances were inspired by double bassist Jasper Høiby's sister, who was

blinded by cataracts. Nonetheless, *Walking Dark* does follow a roadmap. Each of the 12 numbers has a single author and displays the structural integrity achieved by reading from the same page. Yet the intuitive playing is suffused with lessons learned from their "sightless" experiments. Four albums in, these guys know where their cohorts are headed, with or without a destination in view.

Original tunesmith Høiby now shares writing duties with drummer Anton Eger

and pianist Ivo Neame. And while Eger's "Democracy," for example, points the group in a new direction, individual tracks form a cohesive set. Compare the introductions to the title cut, by Høiby, and to Eger's "The Economist." The latter kicks off with a frantic figure by Neame, regularly supplemented by cymbal smacks that are equally witty and exciting. The pace of the former may be considerably more deliberate, but the elements, and the precision of their presentation, are quite similar.

Which isn't to suggest the recording lacks variety. On Neame's "Passing Clouds," the pianist creates a bucolic environment that subtly builds in urgency, the aural equivalent of a sunny day giving way to a sudden storm. In contrast, Høiby's "Suede Trees" swings with practiced assurance, as epitomized by a bass solo so confidently rendered that it doesn't need to swagger. And then there's "American Jesus," a compendium of oddball snippets, courtesy of composer Neame, which shouldn't cohere but somehow does. The track not only rewards repeated listens, but demands them. As does *Walking Dark*, satisfying with the lights on or off. —Michael Roberts

Hristo Vitchev Quintet

The Perperikon Suite
(First Orbit Sounds)

Concept albums devoted to ancient civiliza-



tions are common in prog-rock and classical music, but are rare in jazz. The ancient Thracian city of Perperikon inspired this resplendent seven-part jazz

suite from Bay Area guitarist Hristo Vitchev, who composed and performed it at the 2010 Monterey Jazz Festival. An intricate ECM-influenced offering, *The Perperikon Suite* truly manifests the spirit of a mystical place.

Dating to 5000 B.C., Perperikon was a religious center and natural fortress atop a rocky hill in present-day Bulgaria. Today, the city's ruins are an archeological site and historical attraction in Vitchev's homeland.

Vitchev's multihued compositions are like impressionistic sound paintings — melodic yet understated. In fact, the guitarist is also a talented artist whose

paintings adorn his CD covers. While Vitchev's music feels fully composed, the players impart a sophisticated spontaneity. Vibraphonist Christian Tamburr lends a strong Gary Burton-like feel to the music. This sensibility is enhanced by the leader's agile, Metheny-esque guitar and the brainy piano of his frequent collaborator Weber Iago, a Brazilian émigré to the United States. Bassist Dan Robbins and drummer Joe DeRose build an ever-shifting foundation beneath the atmospheric textures.

Each movement evokes a sense of mystery befitting a particular site within the ancient city. "The Stone Passage" opens the album on a haunting and lyrical note. DeRose's vigorous rhythms drive "The Great Hall," another complex piece that captures the grandeur of a palace's ceremonial room. Propelled by a quick vamp, "The Acropolis" portrays the bustle of a Thracian city. "The Shrine of Dionysus" features a dramatic head, rhapsodic form and several dazzling solos.

Vitchev's emotive music exudes a spacious, jazz-meets-folk-meets-classical aesthetic more typical of Nordic jazz than traditional Bulgarian forms. Regardless, the musicianship is exquisite. Fans of Gary Burton and Pat Metheny should enjoy *The Perperikon Suite*. —Ed Kopp

Devin Gray

Dirigo Rataplan
(Skirl)

The title of drummer Devin Gray's debut as a leader, *Dirigo Rataplan*, loosely translates from Latin and French as "leading from the beat." And Gray's skills allow him to do just that, with grace and determination.

The 28-year-old, Brooklyn-based drummer and composer builds complex tonal structures with angular and percussive taps and thrums that are frequently in the forefront. And he not only keeps pace with his more-seasoned bandmates, he also creates environments for their individual skills to shine. On "Talking With Hands," tenor saxophonist Ellery Eskelin and trumpeter Dave Ballou, both mainstays of New York City's progressive-jazz milieu, improvise over Gray's melody in a quasi-tribute to

Albert Ayler's New Orleans-influenced style of extemporization. In contrast, on "Quadraphonically," Eskelin and Ballou support their leader with brief, ingenious, staccato notes.

On "Thicket," sax and trumpet resemble mournful bagpipe notes floating across a lonely, moonlit heath, as Eskelin and Ballou harmonize over virtuoso Michael Formanek's heady bowed bass. A nocturnal ambience also pervades their free-flowing, four-way musical conversation "Prospect Park in the Dark." A composition of Zen beauty, it's dedicated to the quintessential modernist of American music, Charles Ives. With lyricism and vibrato, Eskelin's solos add an edge to tunes such as the intricately crafted and down-home funky "Down Time" and the turbulently engrossing "Katahdin."

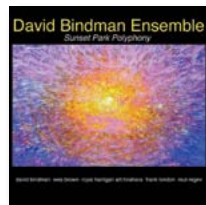
Exhibiting both exuberance and maturity beyond his years, Gray's eloquent, freshman statement lives up to his well-deserved reputation. —Hrayr Attarian

David Bindman Ensemble

Sunset Park Polyphony
(self-produced)

The self-released *Sunset Park Polyphony* is saxophonist David Bindman's most ambitious recording to date. On this double-CD, he defines himself as a bandleader, composer and improviser more fully than on previous recordings. His compositions blend jazz with musical elements from India and Africa, without sounding a bit like world-music fusion. They're complex, but lyrical and clear, and broadly programmatic.

According to liner notes, the nostalgic "Long Line Home" contains autobiographical impressions of childhood, while the title track was inspired by observations of daily life in his Brooklyn neighborhood. "Landings Suite," the lengthy piece that occupies most of the second disc, weaves political, cultural and metaphysical themes into a personal mythology. Bindman's solo on the title track deftly displays tension and release, allowing it to breathe naturally. Moreover, his thoughtful solo on "The Transient" contains varied phrasing and textures while main-



taining an even-keeled intensity.

The sextet handles the challenges of compositions such as "Shape One," which contains multiple layers of time, without breaking a sweat. Thus, the music, even at its knottiest, carries a comfortable, lived-in quality. And shifting rhythmic foundations don't trip them up as soloists, either.

Pianist Art Hirahara consistently raises the emotional stakes, studding his solo on "Shape One" with bruising chords and long, sprinting lines. Trumpeter Frank London takes a subtly colored, soft-textured solo on "Robeson House Echoes," an homage to the late trumpeter Bill Dixon. Trombonist Reut Regev "livelies up" the reggae-inflected sections of "Recurring Dream," and his duet with bassist Wes Brown is one of the highlights of "The Transient." Meanwhile, drummer royal hartigan keeps everyone in the groove with his relaxed, conversational trap kit.

Bindman's beautifully crafted and executed major statement should be a harbinger of things to come. —Ed Hazell

Gabriel Vicéns

Point in Time
(self-produced)

Gabriel Vicéns' *Point in Time* displays exceptional maturity in composition and performance. As the Puerto Rican guitarist thoughtfully develops each improvised solo, it's easy to forget this is his debut release. What's more, his beautifully crafted, thoroughly modern compositions fill the entire program. Puerto Rican stalwarts David Sánchez on tenor saxophone and Eddie Gómez on bass join in on several cuts, their instrumental offerings adding recognizable voices rather than raising the bar.

Vicéns and his regular band of like-minded Latinos — alto saxophonist Jonathan Suazo, pianist Eduardo Zayas and drummer Vladimir Coronel — along with Australian bassist Matt Clohesy, deliver stellar performances. This cohesive unit adds fire and depth to most of the dozen tracks. Mexican drummer Coronel especially shines. His percolating rhythms drive the band hard, although he never plays particularly loudly. His subtle transitions

