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CD Reviews: Underground? Music



I'm not sure if it's really a great marketing ploy to tell the world that your "jazz" is "underground." I do understand that "jazz" can be a hard sell in this day and age. But the artists who make up the Brooklyn Jazz Underground have put their artistry where it counts and, that is, into the music that makes up the initial 3 releases on the the BJU label. Bassist-composer Anne Mette Iversen, the quartet of Will Bernard, Andrew Emer, Benny Lackner and Mark Ferber, and bassist-composer Alexis Cuadrado have CDs that make you sit up and listen and also hope they come around so that you can see them make their music come alive.



Best of the West & Many Places - Anne Mette Iversen Quartet with 4Corners (2CDs) - The Danish-born bassist has issued 2 separate sessions both featuring her fine quartet and the first ("Best of..") adding the string quartet 4Corners. To me, this is a gutsy move and a logical one. Gutsy, because Ms. Iversen is not a known quantity outside of the New York City area and logical, because the twin recordings show the width and breadth of her writing, arranging and performing. Her working band includes the fine young pianist Danny Grisset, the talented saxophonist (and solo artist) John Ellis and the excellent drummer Otis Brown III. 4Corners is a string quartet based in Denmark, all 4 members coming from the ranks of the Danish National Radio Symphony Orchestra, and whose repertoire ranges from Mozart to Beethoven to Ravel to Shostakovich. Iversen has made their contribution an integral part of "Best of.." - several tracks open with the strings only before the "jazz" quartet enters. This is not soft, wimpy, "crossover, but an intelligent blend of classical and jazz components. The 6 tracks, all named for directions, i.e. "North (Allegro)", "West (Menuet)", grab hold of the listener and make you pay attention. Opening the program with "North (Allegro)", the strings play a rapid staccato line before the bass, drums, tenor sax and piano enter. One hears blues mixing with 20th Century classical influences, the strings wrapping their sound around the pulsing rhythm section. Ellis's solo moves rapidly over the lush piano chords and muscular drum work. When the strings reenter, there is no diminution of the sound but an intelligent blending of sounds. Elsewhere, "North West" is reminiscent of the West Coast (USA) sound of the Charlie Haden Quartet West, mysterious and languid, Grisset's solo echoing Bill Evans here and Herbie Hancock there. Brown III is one of those drummers who is freed from strictly keeping the rhythm (Iversen does a fine job holding the

"bottom") and he pushes and shoves against the soloist, pausing to color with cymbal work, dropping out for the strings.

If you do not pay attention, a sameness seems to fall over the entire project but on closer inspection, this is music that has tension and resolution, has complex melodies that don't just serve as springboard for solos. One feels that Iversen has spent plenty of time giving the music its structure through the string arrangements and also given her quartet the freedom to move freely within that structure.



"Many Places", recorded 15 months after the program above (December 2007), is the AMI Quartet's second CD. The program, understandably less complex than the double quartet music, actually has more warmth and sharper interplay. Perhaps it's because the group has had more time to work together so that the bassist-composer has an even better understanding of what these particular musicians can do. "Cataldo Ballad" is just gorgeous, taken at slow pace that every note seems heightened, sounds a bit clearer. The bassist's work below the soloist is quite melodic. Here, it's the drummer keeping the bottom while Iversen plays counterpoint. There are several "straight-ahead" tracks, with conventional theme -solo-theme structures. Grissett does an impressive job shadowing Ellis's melody lines on "Out of the Atlantic", his chordal work echoing the melody. The title track opens with a slow, bowed bass solo, before Grissett takes the reins and runs over a subtle, yet high-powered rhythm. The pianist plays loping lines, phrases that remind one of McCoy Tyner without the pounding chords. Ellis has a conversational style on tenor, seemingly in a dialogue with either the pianist or drummer. He and Brown have a funky chat on "Sambavian" - they push at each other, sax phrases chasing the active drum phrases, having fun. When Grissett steps forward for his solo, he bounces atop Iversen's repeated 5-note bass line (with some alterations.) "The Square in Ravello" is yet another lovely ballad with sweet, light. lines from Ellis while Brown III patters underneath. The saxophonist, whose own music often reflects his Southern upbringing and New Orleans tenure, does not push his own agenda. Instead, he alters his sound for this group, with less exaggeration in his phrasing, not actually eschewing the blues but imbuing his phrases with a lighter, cleaner, tone.

These 2 disks, with nearly 2 hours of music, go a long way to define Anne Mette Iversen. She's not out to shock the listener nor does she "dumb down" her music. Her niche is post-bop, using the mid-60s sound of Herbie Hancock and Wayne Shorter as a guide but never imitating either. While the Quartet's debut disk is quite solid, this music is more mature, with the band trusting each other's instincts so the results are more satisfying. For more information, go to www.annemetteiversen.com.



Night For Day - Bernard/Emer/Lackner/Ferber - This foursome came together while teaching at a summer jazz camp in 2007. Bernard (guitar), a native of the San Francisco Bay area, is best known for his forays into jazz-funk with a decidedly New Orleans feel to his music. Lackner (piano), a native and resident of Berlin, Germany, has toured with his own trio since the breakup of Maroon, an eclectic band that mixed numerous styles. Ferber (drums), another Bay Area native, is an in-demand drummer who is an intuitive

musician, creating sounds and rhythms that enhance the music. Emer (bass), yet another Californian, has studied and worked with many jazz artists and also is involved with creating music for stage productions.

While one might easily expect Bernard's or Lackner's musical preferences to influence the band, what one hears is the result of the group creating its own sound. The jazzy lilt to Emer's "Waltz" has room for Ferber to sparkle and Bernard to be highly melodic and "swinging" at the same time. Bernard's "Dry Tortugas" exhibits a bluesy Tom Waits feel and more than a touch of Bill Frisell in the guitar chords. Lackner's rambling solo on the lower half of the keyboard moves easily as Ferber pops and sizzles below and Emer bounce along the beat. Bernard employs slide guitar on several cuts, reminding this listener of Dave Tronzo. He uses it to great effect on the band's reading of Billy Strayhorn's "Heaven", lovingly and gracefully moving through the melody. The short piano solo is both articulate and dreamy, as if trying to define the song title in musical phrases. There's even a touch of the "wah-wah" pedal on Lackner's evocative "Snow." Despite the brevity of that track, the piece has a meditative feel, a "tone-poem" with a painterly touch. More blues-like work on "Nothing To See", which evokes both Muddy Waters and mid-60s Blue Note recordings (Ferber channels Tony Williams underneath the solos.)

"Night For Day" is music expands with subsequent listenings as one notices more and more of the textures, the short, pithy, solos and the excellent rhythm section. One looks forward to live performances to see and hear how this quartet continues to grow.



Puzzles - Alexis Cuadrado - The Spanish-born bassist assembled a fine core group of musicians for this, his 3rd, CD as a leader. Loren Stillman (saxophone) and Brad Shepik (guitar) make up the front line and the (seemingly) ubiquitous Mark Ferber (drums) supplies the rhythms. Recorded in the bassist's living room, the program reflects the myriad influences of the bassist-composer's life. "Bright Light" lives up to its name, with a "bright" soprano saxophone melody and "light" guitar flashes (though Shepik's solo gets a bit distorted), atop a rocking drum beat and bouncing bass lines. "Quintessential" pairs Stillman's alto saxophone with trombonist Mark Ferber (the drummer's brother) for a multi-sectioned piece that reminds one of the Dave Holland Quintet. Ferber (the drummer) really drives the piece, reacting to the soloists and goosing them on. "Organist Pete Rende adds more color to "B&W Pop", his warbling tone adding a gospel-ish feel behind the pretty alto sax melody. Shepik rides atop the crisp drumming, offering a blues-tinged solo that really swings. Cuadrado pays tribute to filmmaker Federico Fellini with the mysterious "8&1/2", an abstract work with a bow to Joe Zawinul's "In A Silent Way" and sly quotes from "The Third Man Theme." A quiet yet insistent bass line opens "Tango", a piece with a handsome descending melody line and an alto solo that builds off the theme and moves forward with grace and fire. The program closes with "East 10th Shuffle" and, yes, it's a blues with a solid backbeat and a ripping melody line played by alto and trombone. Ferber (the trombonist) and Shepik rip into their solos, having a blast rising above the "slamming" rhythm section. Before the close, Ferber the drummer gets to "strut" his "chops" and the tune ends on a satisfying note (chord, actually.)

To my ears, "Puzzles" is no mystery but a great set of songs, well-played, with lots of feeling. The core band is comfortable with each other, knowing they can take chances with the music. The solos are longer than on the CD right above yet each player has great confidence in his ability to keep the music fresh. You may not know Alexis Cuadrado's name now but he has begun to make his mark on the creative music scene with his smart compositions and strong musicianship.

To find out more about the members and recordings of the Brooklyn Jazz Underground, go to www.bjurecords.com.

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