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MUSIC IN THE BETWEEN TIMES

IN OUR PERIOD OF *COVIDOTIUM*—that strange and anxious new leisure time of various and variable lockdowns, deconfinements, bubbles, waves, and threatened or real reconfinements—music has taken on enhanced value while also suffering deeply from the current obstacles to finding it, listening to it, and making it with others. While this chronicle normally alternates between reviews of live performances and new recordings, I would like to recommend some recordings that may help to quench the craving for live music in our between times.

Pat Metheny's new album *From this Place* (2020), which is the first newly recorded material from Metheny since *Kin* (2014), prolongs the epic-lyric fusion that the globally renowned guitarist and composer has practiced so successfully since his earliest recordings as a group leader. It is also heartbreakingly reminiscent at times of the album *As Falls Wichita, So Falls Wichita Falls* (1981), which was the only recording to bear the name of American pianist Lyle Mays with Metheny's own on the marquee instead of simply as a vital original member of the Pat Metheny Group. *From this Place* was released very soon after news of that probing and forceful pianist's death in February. It is impossible, then, not to hear the music in this sad coincidence at least in part as an elegy. It is also undoubtedly an elegy for America, as the song titles, the tornado on the cover, the liner materials, and the album's critical reception situate it very precisely in relation to the multiple storms, challenges, and fears of 2020. The vinyl edition includes a long essay by Metheny, in which he describes the album as worriedly elegiac but also confidently synthetic and prospective, as it is "a kind of musical culmination, reflecting a wide range of expressions that have interested me over the years."

Years ago a good friend of mine, who is himself a guitarist, referred to the Pat Metheny Group's work both lovingly and exasperatedly as "adventure music for geriatrics," and there is a lot of truth in that perception. To-

day, however, we might be inclined to read this new album not as a comfortable armchair adventure but rather as an expression of earned resilience, not as nostalgia but rather as the unforced and necessary work of remembering, and not as a cozy corner of aestheticized escape but rather as a commitment to dwelling in the openness derived from young Metheny's mid-western geopoetics—a stance that has expanded over decades into a rooted cosmopolitanism, which is affirmed undogmatically in everything from his never-settled ongoing stylistic and technological fusions to the world-spanning membership of his new group (which first played a number of concert dates together in Japan in 2016).

One of the highlights of the album is the song “America Undefined”—a thirteen-plus-minute opening suite that starts with a beautiful arco bass line by Australian bassist Linda May Han Oh and quickly expands to a series of vignette-like statements, enriched by an orchestra and set off by carefully restricted brief solo sections. By the halfway point, the groove has settled in and Metheny takes a very fine chorus with a crisp, unsynthesized sound. The last five minutes are underpinned by a foreboding marimba and orchestral pad, and we get the jarring superimposition of a range of samples from crowd noise to a hurtling train. (It would be impossible to reduce this piece, in spite of its title, to any kind of socio-political or historical statement, but the undefinition in its name gets reinforced and perhaps clarified by the video released in support of this track, which is available for viewing on YouTube.) The incredible cymbal work of Mexican-American drummer Antonio Sánchez (*Bad Hombre* is the twisted Trumpian title of his own 2017 album) is brought forward in the fierce drive to a provisional conclusion.

“You Are” starts with British pianist Gwilym Silcock's intervallic, minimalist introduction in a slow 3/4 time, which imperceptibly complexifies itself as other instruments slip in. Harmonic tensions gradually emerge and provide a melancholic first coat on the canvas when Metheny's guitar comes in to fill the foreground, stating a sharp and serious theme with just a few lines of melodic material. As in so much of his work, a voice has joined too, almost unnoticed in the mix, singing syllables rather than words (it is the voice of American singer Meshell Ndegeocello, who is remarkable on several tracks here). Sánchez's drumming grows more and more intense as the layers being built up become both more distinct and more unified over a prolonged crescendo (you will have to turn this down if you are wearing headphones). The reverse movement is achieved more compactly and ten-

derly, and you may find yourself singing along with its sinking feeling until the strings (so present on this album) take over the insistent restatements and you are left again with the bare, fragile figure of the opening source.

“Same River” features a 6/8 groove set at a tempo and in a spirit made for swinging over the bar lines. Metheny’s signature synth-guitar rips into the second solo with an exultant purposefulness, and anyone who has fallen under the spell of his music will recognize those inimitable glissy slides into notes paired with quasi-pizzicato repetitions and well-trying, brilliantly syncopated ornamentations. What differentiates this work from much of what preceded it is no doubt a slightly different emphasis in the production, which is difficult to define but must have something to do with the balance of bass and piano, and most obviously the exquisite if sometimes hard-to-accept orchestrations of the Hollywood Studio Symphony, conducted by Joel McNeely. How can this be so sugary *and* so good? It’s a dilemma! The lick at the end of “Same River,” foregrounding the flute and dovetailing with a sexy, infilling outro by Metheny, is positively Bacharach-like.

The Marcin Wasilewski Trio (with American saxophonist Joe Lovano) released a ten-track recording titled *Arctic Riff* (2020) in June. Readers of this column will know that I am a big believer in this Polish piano trio and have particularly enjoyed their albums where a guest saxophonist rounds out the brilliant, Baltic formation. It took me a few listens of this album to approach the enthusiasm I felt instantly for previous outings, like *Spark of Life* (2014) and *Faithful* (2011), but there is an evolution and a subtlety here that reward further attention. It may be closest in spirit to what I think of as a more introspective set on the album *January* (2008).

The track that immediately captivates, and never ceases doing so, is “Fading Sorrow.” Lovano’s extraordinary approach to each note, articulating a remarkable focus and a singularity of occasion and utterance each and every time, is shown to beautiful advantage and heard in the impeccably captured breathing of the player and the flow of air through the instrument (what production values!). The piano set-up for this track is gentle—I almost want to say reverent—and the repetitive melody has a bittersweet turnaround that double hits the listener with its poignancy. The bass and drums are flawlessly arrayed in support, and high glissando notes on the upright, sudden bright deployments of the ride cymbal, and well-situated toms are always placed just so. The experienced interplay of the trio evident on this track and throughout is as fine an example of the piano-centred combo

as there is on today's jazz scene. The solo by Polish bassist Slawomir Kurkiewicz, first over a riff, then over the whole form of the tune, is intensely soulful and irreproachably tasteful.

The album ends with "Glimmer of Hope," which is a moody, low-tempo, and frequently cadenza-like exploration, and Lovano's contribution shows just how well these musical personalities have understood and supported one another. The title of course also resonates these days with global anxieties (I just read, for instance, that All Saints' Day, a culturally central holiday in Poland, has been disrupted this year by COVID). *Arctic Riff* is a slow-to-register but truly serious and uplifting listening experience.

The Jerry Granelli Trio Plays Vince Guaraldi and Mose Allison (2020) is a delightful retrospective move from this protean and productive octogenarian drummer, but it is a retrospective that is anything but nostalgic. Renewing his connection to the music of the very different Guaraldi and Allison, with whom he played and recorded extensively in the 1960s and in the 1970s and 1980s, respectively, Halifax-based Granelli pushes things forward with his new American accomplices, including the very insightful young bassist Bradley Christopher Jones and the brilliantly chosen funk renovator Jamie Saft at the piano. This music is so groovy! It is mostly just a really smart and open-minded update on jazz-rock-blues, but it also has moments like the opening track, "Cast Your Fate to the Wind," which soars with a restrained longing and in which one senses the fruits of Granelli's long commitment to serious spiritual practice in the Buddhist tradition.

The anecdote Granelli recounts in the liner notes about his near-firing by Guaraldi in San Francisco in 1966 says much about the drummer's aspirations. Having played too exuberantly and busily one evening, Guaraldi took him aside and said, "Hey man, I don't need that shit you're playing, what I want is the fire, that thing, that energy that makes you play it, but not IT." The lesson he learned was to "serve the music."

The album comprises three compositions by Guaraldi (including "Christmas Time Is Here" from his 1965 album *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, which is one of the best-selling jazz albums of all time) and four by Allison ("Star Song" is misattributed to him in the liner notes). It also contains two very contemporary and exciting near-symbiotic bass-drum meditations on mid-to-late century modern funk, "Mind Preludes 1 and 2," which were co-written by Granelli and Jones. One other highlight that captures the spirit of the record is the traditional blues track, "Baby, Please Don't Go," which

can actually be heard coming repeatedly—in retrospect—in the preceding track, “Parchman Farm” (an Allison number). The naturalness with which one follows the other had me double-checking the track number on the car stereo as I listened to this CD while driving to Prince Edward Island. The playfulness of the opening drum hits and piano shots and some preliminary exploration of extensions over the deceptively simple map of the territory bring us quickly into a minimalist statement of the well-known head. Saft is at his best here, punctuating the complex movements of the others with great big chord shots like a one-man big band, elongating the reach of the basic blues harmony with imaginative, sophisticated melodic extensions, and then returning seamlessly to crunching out the fundamentals—slurring into blue notes, rippling-rolling barrel house tremolo chords, and drawling out the front porch phrasing. From time to time he is given lots of empty space by his bandmates to fill up with everything from achingly behind-the-beat single notes to atonal, gestural swathes of sixty-fourth notes to in-your-face, urgent five-octave block chords. A very fun and powerful track from a fine, satisfying recapitulation of sixty years of serving the music and passing it along!

American pianist Keith Jarrett’s *Budapest Concert* (2020) was recorded at the Béla Bartók National Concert Hall on July 3, 2016, and it includes fourteen tracks, including twelve numbered free improvisations (one of them generically subtitled “blues”) and two introspectively read standards: “It’s a Lonesome Old Town” and “Answer Me.”

Released dangerously close to my deadline, I can only offer a handful of observations on the album here, but I believe this concert recording is destined to join the rare company of the Cologne, Milan, and Carnegie Hall concerts, having evidently met the artist’s and the label’s very demanding standards for release. It takes on enhanced importance given the awful news circulating of Jarrett’s health problems. After what reports indicate as two serious strokes, his ability to perform ever again seems unlikely. Other fine examples of such high-risk evenings no doubt lie waiting dormant in the archives, but for now admirers (unconditional or merely fascinated) of Jarrett’s incomparable free composition and improvisation will be thrilled to get this precious collection of a generous eighty-eight minutes worth of music from that Hungarian summer show.

“Part IV” happens in one of my favourite characteristic Jarrett modes—dissonant gospel—in which a repetitive but infinitely varied bass figure is

worked out to its extreme consequences. About two and a half minutes in, something occurs harmonically that is unexpectedly bright and consequential, then things settle in more darkly again. If anything, the track is driven even harder by the groove, which seems to generate harmony and melody from itself with only the most concise and punctuated right-hand interventions—suggestions rather than affirmations. There is no full-blooded hallelujah chorus, as sometimes happens, but definitely a tough and welcome slant on some good news.

“Part VI” comes flying right out of the starting gate with its forthrightly bebop inspiration, wandering freely and brilliantly from and toward the expected harmonic groundings (after a couple of minutes there is even an allusion to a circle-of-fourths bridge). It’s piano as horn, melodic devices muscularly reset on the keyboard, and a rhythmic forward motion *like* that of a wind instrument somehow combined with the specific percussive resources of the piano. Jarrett expostulates audibly in his ecstatic fashion on this track more than on any but one or two others on the record. Blowing, for sure!

I hope readers have discovered their own inspiring listening in these odd, betwixt, and between times. The next few months will undoubtedly contain their own surprises, in many registers, and will also bring opportunities for the delights of close listening and, eventually, for listening together again.