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## THE WORK OF UNEASINESS: THREE CONFINEMENT ALBUMS

IN MY PREVIOUS CHRONICLE, I described the Pat Metheny album *From This Place* (2020) as situated “very precisely in relation to the multiple storms, challenges, and fears of 2020.” The three albums by American jazz figures that I will consider this time go even further in their alertness to those challenges and fears. One was very explicitly composed from COVID confinement abroad, a second was prepared before the pandemic in hopeful anger with respect to social injustice, and the third was written and performed as part of a remarkable surge of creativity from a late-career artist, juxtaposing ongoing beautiful music-making with friends and a threnody for Black America. All three recordings incorporate reflective accompanying texts by the artists, which adds yet another layer of challenge to the job of describing and interpreting the music attempted here.

Charles Lloyd and the Marvels’ *Tone Poem* (2021) is the third album from this formation, led by the unquenchable creator, saxophonist Charles Lloyd. The group is anchored by Eric Harland on drums and Reuben Rogers on bass—the rhythm section of Lloyd’s New Quartet (I discussed their album *Passin’ Thru* in the autumn 2017 issue). However, the Marvels band concept piles on something quite different from that ensemble—namely, the divergent-convergent electrified strings of guitar and steel guitar (played by true giants on those instruments, Bill Frisell and Greg Leisz, themselves long-time collaborators). This is the first all-instrumental album by the group, as their previous two albums—*I Long to See You* (2015) and *Vanished Gardens* (2018)—featured vocals by Willie Nelson, Nora Jones, and Lucinda Williams. Some critics have observed that the music on this record is song-like, and that might be one way of getting at its singular flow.

If it ever settled (but how could it?), then it could be said that *Tone Poem* is poised perhaps between open-skied Americana musing, crowded-club

post-Bop shouting, gentle dance-floor latinesque homage, and irrepressible, undeniable freedom of exposition. It demands and requires worldly stylistic transitions that are aesthetically in and for these times. While it is highly composed—even tightly arranged at times—it also shows the potential of wandering into the wilder, daring, and insurrectional terrain so often favoured by Lloyd.

Lloyd's multi-part "Tone Poem," the fourth track on the album, gets to most of these places and has no trouble keeping them together and apart in connected, juxtaposed spaces of aware collaboration amongst all the players. Their supportive, confident disregard for mere stylistic constraints and their high regard for one another's gifts shine through.

The coherence of the recording is apparent in the impeccable ordering and continuity of the tracks and confirmed by the poetic and allusive texts by Lloyd in the supporting liner materials. "Wistful tones of the swamp birds' refrain / echo over and over, like an anthem / as a child leaves the dismal swamp with a poem in his pocket." This one stanza captures about half of the album's titles and does lyrically something like what the music does without lyrics!

Amazing sweetness descends at times as the steel guitar doubles the tenor saxophone, occasionally adding the sliding, swelling vibration of trembling broad chords, which are perfectly placed beneath the perfect but never obvious phrasing of the agile leader's single notes. A beautiful example of this is their brooding take on "Monk's Mood."

Other highlights include Lloyd's "Dismal Swamp"—a sixties-reminiscent groovy blues number with a rollicking, celebratory vibe. Lloyd's mostly flowing but sometimes grinding woodwind always sounds so joyful! Frisell's playing on this track feels particularly empathetic and humorous, just like the grin he wears on the band photo.

The track "Ay Amor," which was recorded live at the Noches del Botánico festival in Madrid, is a piece by the mythical Latin-American figure Ignacio Jacinto Villa Fernández. It is a deceptively mellow Latin outing where all present combine ease and adventure, and it glows with present friendship and respect for those who have passed: "Long life, still here, much seen . . . / Bow my head to pray for the ancestors / who muffled their words to survive."

Throughout this recording there is a spiritual and political conjunction that is non-propositional and resistant to simplification. Its modest but as-

sured radicality is devoted to consciousness raising, and it articulates a vision in which the litany of African-American deaths ending with “Trayvon, Ahmaud, George / Breonna” is set alongside the album’s bracketing of Ornette Coleman’s “Peace” and Lloyd’s “Prayer”: “Lift us up. Go forward in the light of peace ahead.”

The Vijay Iyer Trio’s *Uneasy* (2021) is a gorgeous and disquieting recording. Right from the first notes, it is bursting with musical promise and existential intention, like a flower already showing its full possibility as a time-lapse film begins. Its moods are varied but organized. One feels its purposefulness and can read Iyer’s own conception of it in his thoughtful notes: “The word ‘uneasy’ feels like a brutal understatement, too mild for cataclysmic times. But maybe, since the word contains its own opposite, it reminds us that the most soothing, healing music is often born of and situated within profound unrest; and conversely, the most turbulent music may contain stillness, coolness, even wisdom.” Iyer is thus striving for a unity of oppositions that would take the measure of our time, and he also describes the album as a “tribute to both the loud and the quiet, the quick flurry and the slow rise, the hurricane and its eye, the uprising and its steady dream of abolition.” His language here hints at the inevitable political dimensions of the work of uneasiness (as we might speak of the work of mourning).

The work of affirmation, iteration, and infinitesimal differentiation through considered and passionate repetition, which is so crucial to the aesthetic and spirit of all Iyer’s recordings, is present here in spades. *Uneasy* reveals many variations on this hard-won drive—from frenzied unison playing to almost imperceptible rearrangements of the plates beneath broad continents of meshed sound—and the sense of a single motion and intentionality is strong throughout. In short, this trio is incredibly *together*. A couple of fine examples include the beautiful bass solo against a grinding piano-drum pedal in “Touba” and Iyer’s wildly comprehensive piano solo in the late great Geri Allen’s composition “Drummer’s Song.”

“Configurations” rises to the intriguing implications of its title and could probably be broken down into a book of exercises for advanced students! But it is a lot more than an assemblage of rhythmic figures, and too much depends on the figuring-with, the aligning, and the likening in elaboration.

“Combat Breathing” takes us into an 11/8 time signature, but for the mathematically gifted and trained Iyer this is as transparent as any other metre and just as open to play. Its title, like “Children of Flint” and most

others on this record, points to a working out in art of political dismay and anger with contemporary injustice in the U.S. But that kind of direct referential line is always both inadequate and overdetermining for a musical artist.

In an “Object of Sound” podcast interview with the poet and cultural critic Hanif Abdurraqib, Iyer discusses at some length what Abdurraqib calls “deeply political music that is independent of lyric.” While Iyer acknowledges that representationality is impossible in musical language, as music does not deal with “pure representation in a one-to-one kind of way,” he adds that there is still some form of representation at work and that his music’s “defiant sense of purpose and possibility” is deeply ethical and political, as it is defined by the African-American experience and constantly reveals that “insistence on being heard on one’s own terms is inherently political.”

Clocking in at just over 40 minutes, Brad Mehldau’s *Suite: April 2020* (2020) is a powerfully intimate recording that deploys a dozen short, interrelated pieces composed by Mehldau following lockdown in the Netherlands. It was recorded under stringent sanitary conditions in late April 2020 at Power Sound Studios in Amsterdam. It also includes a sequence of equally brief treatments of favourite covers at the very end. (That final alignment gives us another angle on the Mehldau pantheon and a statement of transatlantic attraction between the Amsterdams, old and new, featuring Neil Young’s “Don’t Let It Bring You Down,” Billy Joel’s “New York State of Mind,” and Jerome Kern’s “Look for the Silver Lining.”)

The pieces are circumstantial and referential—or representational, in Iyer’s sense above—as they source the experiences and moods of the earliest, most uncertain days of the pandemic. “Ruminations” is the word Mehldau uses to describe them in a revealing video introduction to the album that can be found on his website ([bradmehldau.com](http://bradmehldau.com)). He also describes them as “revelations”: “As difficult as Covid-19 has been for many of us, there have been moments of revelation along the way.” These brilliant, self-aware pieces are intensely focused on an immediate listening that may become a hearing, with all of the ramifications of that insight. (Mehldau also made some sheet music of these pieces available for free on his website, and he sold 1,000 special edition vinyl copies of the album for \$100 each, with the proceeds going to the Jazz Foundation of America to support gigging musicians who were hit hard by the abrupt closure of performance venues.)

“Yearning” pushes harmonic disassociation almost to the point of ato-

nality, implosion, or dispersal, but not quite, like a hand with fingers distorted by work, injury, or illness but still functioning as a hand in an impossible-to-account-for unity.

“In the Kitchen” is a domestic blues, which is part of a sequence within the suite. It delights with its ambidextrous playfulness. For a few bars, the listener first assumes there’s been some overdubbing, but no—two hands are enough.

“Family Harmony” engages many of Mehdau’s most distinctive resources, which are familiar to his listeners but also always undergoing reconsideration, reworking, and revision. I particularly love a single note articulation that he does, which is reminiscent of what a really grooving Hammond organist might do with a rapid-fire thumb and finger hammer-down on a single note, knowing that one infinitely divisible note is enough. Here the gesture might just be “about” working through annoyances with aplomb, fixity with imagination, or confinement with repeated strokes of positive, wide-open energy.

The pieces by other composers in the three-piece “Coda” seem to release something more extroverted in Mehdau, but let’s not exaggerate: they still remain exquisitely contained, disciplined suggestions of passion. Young has probably never been better served by a jazz reading than by Mehdau’s bluesiness here, and the pianist’s regard for the folk-rocker’s lyric and political poetry allows this piece to serve as a general talisman of renewal. Joel’s love song to New York, a favourite of Mehdau’s since his childhood, ripples with a *missing you* that is both rawly nostalgic and confidently restorative, ending with just a little flourish of Gershwin—rhapsodic, blue, future-directed . . . What a miniature for the biggest of apples!

I will conclude this chronicle with a thought, once again, for all the readers seeking musical fulfillment and connection amidst the lingering waves and undertows of the pandemic, and I will articulate this thought by quoting Mehdau quoting Young in hopes of a turn: “Don’t let it bring you down / It’s only castles burning / Find someone who’s turning / And you will come around.” The recordings proposed these past difficult months by such fine artists give us the substance of such a coming around.