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SURPRISES AND REVELATIONS

LOOKING OVER PAST CHRONICLES, no group has appeared more frequently in these columns than the Marcin Wasilewski Trio. And that seems fitting, as it is a band that captures so much about small-group jazz today, admittedly within a certain aesthetic—namely, that of Edition of Contemporary Music in all its sprawling protean fraternity—but with a lot of generalizable propositions beyond that particular sensibility. The now-veteran ensemble’s most recent release, *En attendant* (Waiting, 2021), sees the basic trio format reaffirmed after a collaborative effort with the magisterial, era-defining American saxophonist Joe Lovano on 2020’s *Arctic Riff*. But it’s not quite as simple as a recentring: *En attendant* was in fact recorded at the French studio La Buissonne in August 2019, just prior to Lovano’s arrival for the *Arctic Riff* sessions. With apologies to Samuel Beckett, we have here, then, *En attendant Lovano*.

Waiting for the saxophonist, we can imagine the group running some of the tunes to be recorded with him and adjusting its parameters in detached but purposeful anticipation. Surprisingly, perhaps, the album is anchored by three free improvisations, which is somewhat uncharacteristic of its previous outings, although Wasilewski has remarked in an informative interview (available through Polish cultural services at culture.pl) that “I have never shied away from playing more openly. I like two extremes: something very simple, lyrical, based on tonality on the one hand; and more complex, crazy, atonal sounds on the other.” All three of these improvisations are poised between these orientations or, more accurately, combine them in various ways. All three are entitled “In Motion” (Parts I, II, III) and, clocking in at six to eight minutes each, they thoughtfully strip down and redeploy the rich resources of the group in a remarkably recorded and produced setting. This album sounds as good as anything ECM has ever done.

The opening track, “In Motion Part I,” creates a mood of airy foreboding. Rolling drums and perfectly placed bass gestures, variably crisp and

slurry, are joined by a sympathetic piano, promising perhaps some kind of crystallization into a stable groove or harmony. But the temptation to settle or resolve is not taken up from either side. Exciting harmonic displacements over a steady pedal pile up late in the movement, just as they might over part of the framework of a composed piece. Here they develop toward what I want to call a kind of conclusive discretion that will define the spirit of the rest of the recording. The third piece on the album, “In Motion Part II,” begins like some kind of march led by drummer Michael Miskiewicz, with chordal hints and modal ornamentations proposed by the bassist Sławomir Kurkiewicz and the leader Wasilewski pushing and hitting away inside the piano, providing emphasis and support. A growing syntactical character emerges that never loses its primal, inchoate sources, and an overall nocturnal feeling comes suddenly to flower, maybe even Chopin-like to pick an obvious comparator, in a starry-skied finale. “In Motion Part III,” the disc’s last track, begins with a melodic idea on the piano that elicits a multi-threaded meditation, giving all three instruments voices in a gentle but poignant conversation. Conclusive discretion.

Other highlights include “Vashkar,” the 1965 Carla Bley composition that has become a contemporary standard and certainly a touchstone piece in the Wasilewski repertoire. On the album with Lovano, it was given not one but two treatments by the trio and its guest. The handling of its 6/4 time signature is exemplary on *En attendant*. I’ve never heard the relation of the two “extra” beats in each bar to the piece’s anticipatory and delaying harmonic transitions (something like a turnaround in every bar) quite like this before. The rhythmic pulse follows the harmonic displacements across the bar lines without stumbling into rote and with no lapses in taste—lapses that would be easy to commit through any inattention in this deceptively ordered environment. All of the solos ventured over this foundation are small poetic masterpieces of current jazz vocabulary.

“Variation 25” is the trio’s reimagining of Bach’s twenty-fifth Goldberg Variation. Wasilewski has perhaps never sounded so Jarrettesque. That observation aside, it is clear that this piece represents the kind of re-evaluation of the band’s resources mentioned above and, specifically, the depth of classical culture the group’s leader and members can bring to any playing opportunity. By the third minute, we are far from the 18th-century source and have moved from the undeniable swinging of Bach to the unmistakably cool Baltic swing of these three proponents of northern European pulse

and funk. *Spark of Life*, to follow the logic of an earlier title.

Worthy of mention, too, from another and very different part of the musical forest, is the allusive, respectful take on The Doors' 1971 song "Riders on the Storm." It is allusive because we never hear the melody stated, respectful because the bass figure is admiringly affirmed while being slightly deconstructed in a desire for more, and allusive *and* respectful because an occasional direct quotation from the inner voices of the original track's arrangement finds itself literally inserted into the mix, shimmering with recognizability, even as the band seems to be saying, "oh, we don't really do covers."

Another personal high point from the past year is *The Sparks Brothers* (2021)—English director Edgar Wright's affectionate and fun-loving documentary on the most influential band you may have never heard of: Sparks. Wright, known for his quintessentially British genre spoofs like *Shaun of the Dead* (2004) and *Hot Fuzz* (2007), brings all his cinematic chops and energetic imagination to this ultimate fan letter, which is also a remarkable piece of pop cultural history.

In spite of my generational status (early X), I was not familiar with the band, let alone an aficionado. I didn't do any reading before watching the film, and it took me to about the halfway point before I felt confident that I wasn't in fact having a very clever mockumentary foisted upon me. That is a very exhilarating and uncanny viewing experience, and I wonder how many viewers shared it. The sheer preposterousness of a lot of the musical material, the archetypal childhood backstory, and the preponderance of comedians in the large cast of interviewees all made me suspicious. It was the video for Paul McCartney's 1980 song "Coming Up," in which he impersonates famous rock legacy players in his own backup band, that finally convinced me: there was Sir Paul as Ron Mael, white-shirt-stiff and Chaplin-mustachioed, in the keyboard chair. I remembered that video and knew it was real.

The titular Sparks Brothers (a name they violently rejected when it was first proposed by record company management) are two real brothers named Ron and Russell Mael—Southern California boys who were good at sports and music, popular with their peers, but also deeply traumatized by the early loss of their artist father, who brought them into the fast-moving ferment of early rock 'n' roll and immersed them in the movies with little concern for quality control. By the time we see them at UCLA in the mid-

1960s, art and film students recording their first single “Computer Girl” (1967), they are clearly trying to capture the archetypal aesthetic modes of their day. Their first serious band, Halfnelson, immediately attracts attention and convinces the very young but already incandescent Todd Rundgren to produce their first album. (Their reunion for this film—their first meeting since Halfnelson days—inspired another collaboration, “Your Fandango” [2021], which can be seen online.) Things don’t go at all to plan, the band is hastily renamed (in a revealing paronomastic nod to The Marx Brothers, The Sparks Brothers becomes just Sparks), and the album is re-released with the new name and a new cover. This kind of turbulent shake-up is constitutive of Sparks’ stance and self-chosen precarity throughout their nearly sixty-year history.

As Michael Silverblatt of NPR’s *Bookworm* puts it in the documentary: “Sparks is the quintessence of a band that starts and starts and starts again. No success is big enough for them. No failure is small enough for them.” And the highs and lows outlined in the film are really staggering. Through their numerous collaborations, backing bands, and continual reformations, they have never been silent or gone away.

A very moving aspect of the film is how not a single person appearing on screen has a bad word to say about their propensity to change directions and leave musical friends and collaborators or business associates behind. When Ron talks about the “betrayal” that they chose when they liquidated the first iteration of Sparks and moved to London, Russell’s listening face reveals a hard sadness. The creative priority has been absolute for this pair of “gentlemen,” as crew, management, and musicians unanimously refer to them. And they have been completely forgiven for their choices by other artists left in the lurch or managers and record companies left poorer for their investments.

We see the band head to England, their record company eager to capitalize on their contribution to glam rock, and then return chastened to the U.S., where they are stripped down to a duo before returning in an act of faith to England and becoming a truly British band and phenomenal sensation. We see them reinvent themselves with each album, losing their fan base, acquiring a new one, or sometimes just failing. They brush up close against punk in their iconoclasm and non-conformism but choose to move instead toward electric dance music in the deeper channels of the disco era. 1979’s *No. 1 in Heaven*—an album produced by Giorgio Moroder—is cited

by members of New Order, Blur, Erasure, Human League, Duran Duran, and many others as containing everything that was to come in 1980s synth-driven pop. Sparks, of course, just moved on to other “musical perversions,” as writer Katie Puckrik nicely puts it about another turning point in their evolution.

Sparks are total cinephiles, and they attribute the jagged narratives, quirky characters, and ambivalent perspectives of their songs to the imprint of so many childhood matinees—formative experiences heightened and reoriented by their deep knowledge of 1960s art cinema, particularly the French New Wave. *Bande à part* (Band of Outsiders, 1964) would suit them as a name, too, as they are Godardian, among many other things. Two failed collaborations with filmmakers Jacques Tati and Tim Burton left them emotionally bruised and, in the case of the aborted Burton collaboration, cost them years of creative output. In 2021 (clearly one of the peaks of the Sparks trajectory) they did see their work with French director Leos Carax—a prominent and erratic member of the Cinéma du look generation—come to fruition with the release of their musical *Annette* at the Cannes Film Festival. Just as they wanted to be, and eventually became, a British band, so too did they want to be, and finally became, French filmmakers, thus providing more evidence of their creative determination.

A final detail from the exhaustive and fascinating documentary can give a sense of this total commitment and its rewards. Considering options for a “classic album” tour, as so many aging popsters and rockers have been doing in recent decades, the brothers quickly set aside that notion and opted instead for a three-week stand at the Islington Academy in May 2008, during which they performed a different album each night for a total of nearly 300 songs before premiering their latest album on the 21st night. The interviews with their sidemen about rehearsing four months for this unprecedented and inimitable musical endurance test are truly hilarious. This impossible choice, leading to critical acclaim and audience delirium, says so much about what Rundgren calls their “latent outsider genius.” I don’t love very much of their music, but I love this film and the personalities and artistic integrity that meant it was worth making.