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MUSIC REVIEWS: JAZZ FOR THE JAZZ-SHY FROM JOHN TROPEA, PAT BIANCHI TRIO, AND THE GARY MCFARLAND LEGACY ENSEMBLE

Posted by: Jon Sobel May 28, 2015
in Editor Pick: Music, Editor Picks, Indie Roundup, Jazz, Music, Music Columns, Music Genres, R&B

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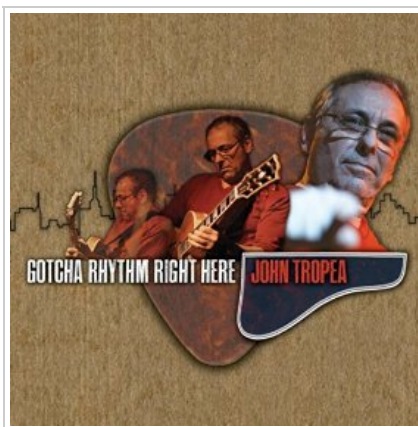
Three new springtime jazz releases strike a balance between accessibility and aficionado appeal. Albums from guitarist John Tropea and organist Pat Bianchi's trio both feature jazz organ, and the Gary McFarland Legacy Ensemble includes Joe Locke on McFarland's instrument, the vibraphone.

John Tropea's *Gotcha Rhythm Right Here* is a collection of originals smacking of jazz fusion, R&B, funk, and a sophisticated big band sound all at once.

I'm partial to the sound of the Hammond organ in jazz, R&B, and rock alike. Tropea's writing partner Chris Palmaro has a warm, lightly funky touch on the Hammond B3 throughout these 13 songs.

The tracks have simple chord progressions underlying complex, propulsive rhythms and riffs. Highlights include the tumbling, polyrhythmic hyperactivity of "7th Avenue South," the offbeat sneakiness of "Chill Wa Man," the bluesy groove of "Side By Two," and Tropea's sparkling guitar work on "Les Is Moe" and "Hip to the Hips." (He does try a little too hard with the song titles sometimes.)

It all adds up to a kaleidoscope of creative songwriting and arranging, virtuosic jamming (just listen to Part 2 of the title track), and nimble, sunshiny-soulful performances by a great band.



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Jazz organ takes the lead on the **Pat Bianchi Trio's** new disc *A Higher Standard*. The disc opens with the old standard "Without a Song," with scintillating soloing from guitarist Craig Ebner and from Bianchi, along with sharp, inventive drumming by Byron Landham. By adroitly handling bass lines on the organ along with his support and solo work, Bianchi makes the trio sound like a quartet.

In a softer mode, Horace Silver's "Blue Silver" swings along in off-kilter rhythms and easy splashes of tone, then centers on an exciting Bianchi solo. He's as adept at exposed melodies – as in the romantic ballad "So Many Stars" and the Bernstein/Green/Comden classic show tune "Some Other Time" – as with the fireworks of the original tune "The Will of Landham" (presumably dedicated to his drummer) and on the quick yet somehow haunting take on the Oscar Pettiford chestnut "Bohemia After Dark."

What makes the music especially appealing is the interplay between the sharp attack of the organ and the gentler tone of Ebner's guitar over Landham's rock-solid, ever-interesting work on the drums. It's an ideal blend of smooth and sophisticated that honors the songs with virtuosity without burying the material in jazzy excess. While the song choices cover a vast area, from Bill Evans to John Coltrane, Leonard Bernstein to Stevie Wonder, ballads to bebop, the trio maintains a steady, fully realized aesthetic that makes the album a pleasure from start to finish.

The Gary McFarland Legacy Ensemble led by drummer Michael Benedict is out this week with *Circulation: The Music of Gary McFarland*, a sunshiny celebration of the 1960s composer, arranger, vocalist and vibraphonist who died in 1971 at age 38. Always inventive and with creative impulses that ranged well beyond jazz, he left behind an eclectic discography and a wealth of superb material that deserves just such a tribute as this.

Whether or not McFarland really "should have been a pop star," as the subtitle of the 2014 documentary film about him states, his songs have an all-in appeal fully evident on this album. Gutsy melodies sail over smooth, bright rhythms in arrangements that could well attract pop fans, including those who have little experience with jazz or have even found it intimidating.

Ever since being introduced to the Modern Jazz Quartet back in high school, I've been almost as partial to the vibraphone as I am to jazz organ. Here it's Joe Locke handling the mallets brilliantly. His playing shines throughout, with solos that enlighten the bluesy "Why Are You Blue?" and froth up the trippily swinging "Sandpiper," among others.

Saxophonist Sharel Cassity takes the lead on an expansive and easygoing rendition of the torchy "One I Could Have Loved." Only with the seventh track, "Bridgehampton Strut," does the quintet show off its facility with bebop vagueness, full of sparkling work from Benedict on the drums and a Bruce Barth piano solo full of complex rhythms and multidirectional energy. By the time the head (the main theme) reasserts itself in the final minute of this eight-minute track, the world seems a bigger place.



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The languid, tongue-in-cheek “Blue Hodge” follows as a nice contrast, with bluesy solos from Locke, Barth, and bassist Mike Lawrence and a fiery one from Cassity. My favorite track of all may be the punchy, playful “Notions,” a speedy ensemble number that features the rhythm section.

Locke’s lovely, moody solo arrangement of “Last Rites for the Promised Land” makes a fitting album closer. And “Circulation,” the title track, is a quick, stark number that points out by its very name the album’s worthy purpose: to keep the music of Gary McFarland in circulation.



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ABOUT JON SOBEL



Jon Sobel is an Executive Editor of Blogcritics as well as lead editor of the Culture & Society section. As a writer he contributes most often to Culture, where he reviews NYC theater; he also covers interesting music releases. He writes the blog Park Odyssey, for which he is visiting and blogging every park in New York City—over a thousand of them. Through Oren Hope Marketing and Copywriting you can hire him to write or edit whatever marketing or journalistic materials your heart desires. By night he’s a working musician: lead singer, songwriter, and bass player for Whisperado, a member of other bands as well, and a sideman.



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