

# Record Reviews



## REZ ABBASI

### UNFILTERED UNIVERSE

*Propensity; Unfiltered Universe; Thoughts; Thin-King; Turn Of Events; Disagree To Agree; Dance Number (52:00)*

Rudresh Mahanthappa (as); Vijay Iyer (p); Abbasi (elg); Johannes Weidenmüller (b); Dan Weiss (d); Elizabeth Mikhael (clo) on tracks 2, 5 and 7. Brooklyn, 2-3 February 2016.

### Whirlwind 4713

★★★★

Earning considerable kudos by reuniting two of the giants of Asian-American jazz, Vijay Iyer and Rudresh Mahanthappa, Rez Abbasi never seems content to settle for average. Drawing liberally on Indian and European classical music, post-bop and

hard rock, the disc has a title that hints at the Karachi-born guitarist's intentions. Seeking out hidden empathies between seemingly disparate musical raw materials, Abbasi and his like-minded collaborators systematically unpick their hard-wired instincts and create a genre-bending work of uncommon originality.

Although Abbasi turns his back on traditional Indian instruments, the spirit of the great subcontinent is never far away and is most often heard in the music's joyously unpredictable rhythms. *Propensity* offers a perfect case in point. Cycling through a range of choppy and vaguely exotic time signatures, Mahanthappa's full-throttle solo will leave you breathless before he finally gives way to Abbasi's fleet distortion-soaked glissandi. The title track is one of several to be embellished by Mikhael's dark cello, and moves at a more sedate pace than the frantic opener; a reflective Iyer fashions a typically powerful and complex statement. *Thoughts* sees Abbasi experimenting with goofy backwards tape loops, whilst *Thin-King* provides the disc's melodic high spot and brings out strong solos from each of the main protagonists. *Turn Of Events* is a masterclass in tension and release, the decidedly staccato *Disagree To Agree* skilfully negotiates the angular M-Base lines which are such a familiar part of Mahanthappa's vocabulary, and *Dance Number* closes the set with a hard street-savvy groove. More than fulfilling Abbasi's early potential, *Unfiltered Universe* is his most personal and authentic statement to date.

Fred Grand

## AHMED ABDUL-MALIK

### FOUR CLASSIC ALBUMS

*CD1: [Jazz Sahara] (1) Ya Annas (Oh People); Isma'a (Listen); El Haris (Anxious); Farah' Alaiyna (Joy Upon Us); [East Meets West] (2) E-Lail (The Night); La Ibky (Don't Cry); Takseem (Solo); Searchin'; Isma'a (Listen); Rooh (The Soul); Mahawara (The Eagle); El Ghada (The Jungle) (73.14)*

*CD2: [The Music Of Ahmed Abdul-Malik] (3) Nights On Saturn; The Hustlers; Oud Blues; La Ibkey [sic]; Don't Blame Me; Hannibal's Carnivals; [Sounds Of Africa] (4) Wakida Hena; African Bossa Nova; Nadusilma; Out Of Nowhere; Communication; Suffering (68.50)*

(1) Johnny Griffin (ts on 1-3); Naim Maracand (vn); Abdul-Malik (b, oud); Jack Ghanaim (kanoon); Al Harewood (d); Bilal Abdurrahman (tamb); Mike Hamway (darabeka). NYC, October 1958.

(2) Lee Morgan (t on 5, 6, 9); Curtis Fuller (tb on 7, 8, 10-12); Benny Golson (ts); Johnny Griffin (ts on 5, 6, 9); Jerome Richaradson (f on 7, 8, 10-12); Naim Karacand (vn); Abdul-Malik (b, oud); Ahmed Yetman (kanoon); Al Harewood (d); Bilal Abdurrahman, Mike Hamway (darabeka). NYC, March 1959.

(3) Tommy Turrentine (t); Eric Dixon (ts); Abdul-Malik (b, oud); Calo Scott (clo); Bilal Abdurrahman (pc, cl); Andrew Cyrille (d). Englewood Cliffs, May 1961.

(4) Abdul-Malik (b, oud); Scott (clo); Abdurrahman (cl, darabeka); Andrew Cyrille (d on CD2, 10); Eric Dixon (ts on CD2, 10); guests on CD2, 7-9, 11, 12: Tommy Turrentine (t); Edwin Steele (as); Taft Chandler (ts); Rupert Alleyne (f); Montego Joe (cga, bgo); Rudy Collins (d); Chief Bey (African d). NYC, August 1962.

### Avid 1248

★★★★

Abdul-Malik's perhaps best known as a member of Thelonious Monk's 1957/1958 group, coming in after Wilbur Ware, and before John Ore, Butch Warren and Larry Gales took over



long term. No slouch on the bass, then. There's no thriving category for oud players in jazz, though, or not before Anouar Brahem and Rabih Abou-Khalil at any rate, so the Brooklyn-born, Sudanese-descended Abdul-Malik is one of kind, even though fusions of East and West were not uncommon in early 1960s jazz.

A glance at the titles will confirm that his desire to fuse rather than simply juxtapose – which is the unfortunate impression one gets from parts of *Jazz Sahara* – grew over the course of these four records, with more standards, a relatively orthodox oud blues and hybrids like *African Bossa Nova* more in evidence. The revelation on the first pair of albums is Johnny Griffin, who sounds as if he just walked in out of the Sahel, rather than Chicago. There's a moment of high surrealism (worthy of Roland Kirk) on *Isma'a* when Griff quotes *Surrey With The Fringe On Top* before adjusting his jellabiya and disappearing into the mirage. East Meets West is even more heavily supported by acknowledged jazz names, all of them seemingly at ease with Abdul-Malik's not-so-strange charts. Morgan's staggering on *E-Lail* and probably took a lot away from the date. For the rest, take away some of the percussive and the provenance is relatively familiar, on a spectrum from My Favorite Things and early Pharoah Sanders to Ornette's Virgin Beauty.

#### JJ CONTENT

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The leader has a solid, chewy bass sound, similar to Ware. On the later records, he's depped by Calo Scott's cello when switching to oud, but his bass lines are fast, accurate and always just ahead of the beat, enough to suggest that he might well have had a full career on the big instrument even if he hadn't opted to go out bravely on his own with these. More than a footnote, but not quite a major star, he occupies a fascinating place in the jazz recording of his time and this is a most welcome reissue.

Brian Morton

**AMBROSE AKINMUSIRE**

**A RIFT IN DECORUM. LIVE AT THE VILLAGE VANGUARD**

CD1: *Maurice & Michael (sorry i didn't say hello); Response; Moment in between the rest (to curve an ache) Brooklyn (ODB); A song to exhale (diver song); Purple (Intermezzo); Trumpet Sketch (milky pete); Taymoor's World (60.43)*

CD2: *First Page (Shabnam's poem); H. A. M. S. (in the spirit of honesty) Piano Sketch (Sam intro); Piano Sketch (beyond enclosure); Condor (Harish intro); Condor; Withered; Umteyo (54.57)*

Akinmusire (t); Sam Harris (p); Harish Raghavan (b); Justin Brown (d) New York City. No date.

**Blue Note, no number**

★★★

This set was obviously recorded in a club where Coltrane was on more than one occasion, but there's no point in comparing the results. In the press release Akinmusire makes something of having been "really into exploring extremes" but the music on this set is extreme only by comparison with the haughtily reverential reproductions of Wynton Marsalis and his disciples, and doesn't have many eye-widening moments.

Instead a different air of reverence prevails. Melodies are scrupulously avoided, and while the same goes for the kind of harmonic sophistication that we can take for granted these days the overall air is enervated, as though the quartet has tried to suck some element of life out of the music with a view to achieving furrowed-brow earnestness. Thus, *A song to exhale (diver song)* seems longer than it actually is as Akinmusire strives for

**CRITICS' CHOICE**

The 10 CDs JJ critics most wanted to hear from this month's review pile

Ray Charles	Live 1958-60	Hoo Doo 263581
Duke Ellington/Billy Strayhorn	Jazz Selection No.2	Vogue Jazz Club 001
Erroll Garner Trio	Vol.1	Vogue Jazz Club 007
Stan Getz	Stan Getz Quartet	Vogue Jazz Club 002
Bobby Hutcherson	Highway One etc	Beat Goes On 1290
Jelly Roll Morton	Piano Solos	Vogue Jazz Club 008
Red Norvo Trio	Men At Work, Vol. 1	Vogue Jazz Club 010
Charlie Parker	Vol.1	Vogue Jazz Club 005
Art Tatum	From Gene Norman's Just Jazz	Vogue Jazz Club 004
James Blood Ulmer/The Thing	Baby Talk	The Thing Records 006

but doesn't reach his inner Bill Dixon.

Comparison with Dixon is more relevant, but with Dixon's music (as indeed with his trumpet playing) there was/is nothing calculated. His art arrived at the point it did because he refined it, whereas these musicians seem to regard putting some distance between themselves and the ever more densely populated post-bop mainstream as an end in itself. Whether this makes for nourishing or rewarding listening is a matter of taste. The title typography, by the way, is as presented.

Nic Jones



**STEFANO BATTAGLIA PELAGOS**

CD1: *Destino; Pelagos; Migralia; Lamma Bada Yatathanna; Processional; Halap; Dogon; Life (60.36)*

CD2: *Lampedusa; Hora Mundi; Lamma Bada Yatathanna (var.); Exilium; Migration Mantra; Horgis E Roszke; Ufratu; Heron; Brenner Toccata (71.30)*

Battaglia (p, prepared p); Fazoli Concert Hall, Sacile, Italy, May 2016.

**ECM 576 8963**

★★★★

Italian pianist Stefano Battaglia's seventh and first solo ECM release finds him in the same

exquisite voice as before. Some of the pieces in this set were recorded behind closed doors one afternoon at the Fazoli Concert Hall in Sacile, in the northeast of Italy. The rest were recorded live the same evening, although the audience's applause has since been edited out. ECM producer Manfred Eicher then organised the lot into a continuous whole, "a wonderful new shape with a completely new dramaturgy," as Battaglia explains.

Of the music itself, six of the 17 items are Battaglia's own compositions, the rest spontaneously improvised, apart from the two variations on the Arab traditional song *Lamma Bada Yatathanna*. Without exception, he approaches each piece reverentially, coaxing out its harmonies and gently caressing its melodies with classical precision. His is an undemonstrative style of playing, with rarely any flourish or excess but with considerable hypnotic allure and, in places, great beauty. Battaglia's rolling tremolo chords and repeating riffs bring to mind Abdullah Ibrahim's more spiritual moments, a mood echoed in his prepared piano that sounds as if he is striking or rubbing against hand bells. At more than two hours, for some this double set might outlast its welcome, but persevere, for it is well worth the effort.

Simon Adams

**JOHN BEASLEY MONK'ESTRA VOLUME 2**

*Brake's Sake; Played Twice; Crepuscule With Nellie; Evidence; Ugly Beauty/Pannonica; I Mean You; Light Blue; Dear Ruby; Criss Cross; Work (58.22)*

Bijon Watson, Jamie Hovorka, James Ford, Brian Swartz, Brandyn Phillips (t); Francisco Torres,



Wendell Kelly, Ryan Dragon, Steve Hughes, Ido Meshulam, Conrad Herwig (fb); Bob Sheppard, Danny Janklow, Tom Luer, Thomas Peterson, Adam Schroeder, Alex Budman (s); Beasley (p, syn, org, arr, cond); Ben Shepherd (b, elb); Terreon Gully, Gene Coye (d); Dontae Winslow (t, rap); Regina Carter (vn); Kamasi Washington (ts); Dianne Reeves (v); Pedrito Martinez (cga, bata). Los Angeles, circa 2017.

**Mack Avenue 1125**

★★★★★

This is an extraordinary new big band release from Beasley, perhaps even surpassing his *Monk'estra Vol.1* from the later part of 2016, which, had it arrived earlier, would have been a prime contender for my CD of the year last time around. The arrangements are all by Beasley, apart from one contribution by Brian Swartz with his version of *I Mean You*. The playing is superb, and it once again shows just how contemporary sounding an album can be without original material, but rather a set of imaginative and inspired arrangements.

I was particularly drawn to Terreon Gully's drumming (he plays on all tracks except *Light Blue*) which constantly drives the music, but not in a heavy-handed way, adding plenty of detail in the process. The album starts as it means to go on, in a nicely unconventional big band way at times, with Dontae Winslow's rap on the opener