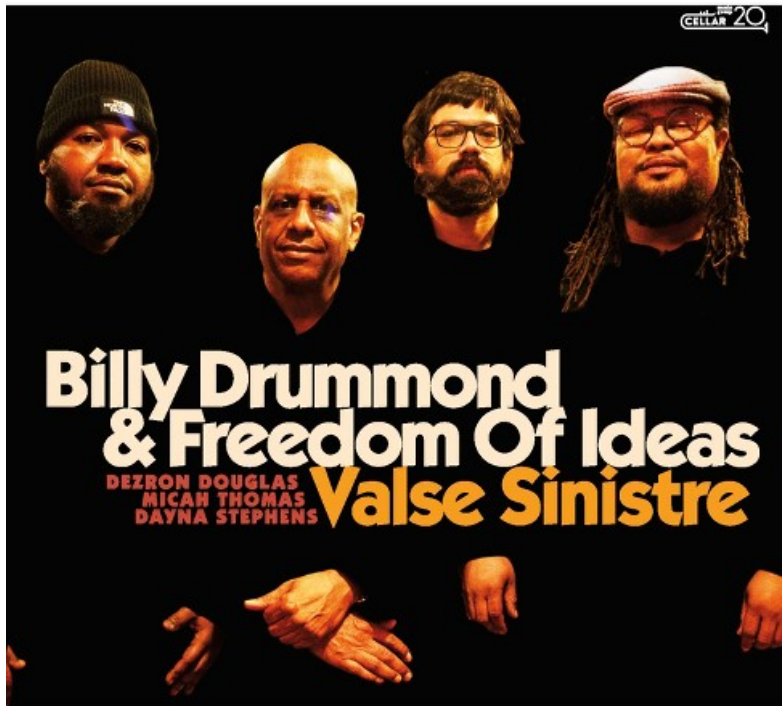


# glide MAGAZINE

ALBUM REVIEW By Jim Hynes



Acclaimed drummer and composer **Billy Drummond**'s *Valse Sinistre* is his first album as a leader since his 1996 hit, *Dubai* which was one of the 50 most influential drumming albums of the past 100 years and the top jazz album of the year, as named by *The New York Times*. His band, Freedom Of Ideas, a quartet he has been leading for the past decade, is a fluid group of those who share similar eclectic tastes and is multi-generational – **Dayna Stephens** on saxophones, **Micah Thomas** on piano, and **Dezron Douglas** on bass. Producer **Jeremy Pelt** helms his fourth project led by a Black artist as part of his ongoing partnership with Cellar Music Group.

The program is a mix of older tunes that Drummond has been playing with other bands as well as newer material and new arrangements. They open with Jackie McLean's "Little Melonae," a bustling rhythmic piece that features solos from Stephens on tenor, Thomas, and Drummond, who is all over his kit, impressing with remarkable cymbal work, among all his other frenetic activity. Thomas (best known perhaps for his work with Immanuel Wilkins) is the composer for "Never Ends," a more introspective and lighter offering that stands out from the others, features Stephens on soprano and Thomas in his signature improvisatory style. Nuanced harmonies and subtle, yet clearly lyrical interaction among the bandmates mark this one, which builds to a nice steady tempo toward its end.

The title track was composed by Carla Bley, with whom Drummond toured for years, making a mental note to record this rather obscure tune of hers. Thomas introduces the rather angular and heavy chords before Stephens, again on soprano, weaves his way around the tricky start-stop rhythms and twisting changes, with Drummond forcefully navigating. As a listener, one has no idea where it's going. Call it delightfully unpredictable even though the refrain does appear periodically in both unison and in snippets of solos from Stephens and Thomas. The delicate ballad "Laura" has a pensive Thomas and bursts of Stephens on tenor as if the two of them were having a hushed conversation.

Another rarity is Grachan Moncur's "Frankenstein." Stephens opens on soprano to a rather feverish rhythm which abates as the piece moves through chambered sections with Douglas and Drummond remaining responsive and loose.

Drummond's sole original, "Changes for Trane and Monk" intercuts John Coltrane's harmonic ideas with Thelonious Monk's melodic leaps and tendencies as Stephens holds sway on soprano, where during solo sections, the band almost intuitively forms a trio sound with Thomas laying out, invoking resonant energy from "Chasin' the Trane."

In December 2020, the community lost Drummond's friend, pianist, and composer Frank Kimbrough. Drummond is the drummer on Kimbrough's 6-CD Boxed set, *Monk's Dreams – The Complete*

*Compositions of Thelonious Sphere Monk* (Nouvelle, 2018), and the two were also close at Juilliard, sharing similar tastes in music." Thus Kimbrough's "Clara's Room" is an elegiac homage to his friend, five gorgeous minutes of solace with Thomas deftly handling Kimbrough's piano lines as Stephens steps in at the midpoint on soprano to carry the bright melody before Douglas takes a lyrical turn.

Drummond also honors his friend, the recently passed Stanley Cowell with "Reconfirmed," a tune providing a kind of deconstruction of "Confirmation" that becomes a feature for Thomas steps out swinging rather than resorting to straight-ahead bebop. Drummond is clearly in his comfort zone here, driving and pushing Thomas. This is a different take, of course than when Drummond recorded it on Cowell's 2015 release, *Reminiscent*. "To close, Drummond honors one of the music's drumming innovators, Tony Williams, with Williams' composition, "Lawra." The quartet, principally through Stephens on tenor states the theme and then engages in collective improvisation across the feeling of the whole piece, rather than over melody or changes.

Drummond carefully chose these selections and sequenced them in the way he wanted the album to flow, creating one of the more interesting recordings of the year with these brilliant musicians.