



Eponymous
John Scofield (ECM)
by Robert Bush

In the 45 years since releasing his first album as a leader, guitarist John Scofield has matured into the role of a leading voice on the instrument. *Solo* represents his third contribution to the ECM label as a leader or co-leader, following *Saudades* with Larry Goldings and Jack DeJohnette (2004) and *Swallow Tales* with Steve Swallow and Bill Stewart (2019).

This latest disc is quite different. ECM has a long tradition with solo guitar albums, ranging from John Abercrombie's *Characters* (1977) all the way up to Ralph Towner's stunning *My Foolish Heart* (2016). On those albums and indeed on most ECM productions, one can feel the influence and ears of long-time ECM founder Manfred Eicher. *Solo* was recorded last August at Top Story Studio in a tiny hamlet of Katonah, New York. Tyler McDiarmid was the engineer and Eicher acted as executive producer.

Scofield plays a wildly eclectic set of about 50% originals balanced by four jazz standards and several rock, country and traditional pieces like "Danny Boy", "Not Fade Away" (Buddy Holly) and "You Win Again" (Hank Williams). The sound is stark and profoundly minimalistic, with Scofield usually brushing out a few chords into a looper then tracking the melody and solos on top. Nowhere to be found is the heavily reverbed "ECM sound".

Repertoire from the Great American Songbook comes off as the most compelling *prima facie* case for Scofield as a master improviser. There is a palpable joy hearing him swinging gently over a tune like Jimmy Van Heusen-Johnny Burke's "It Could Happen To You", evoking the spirit of cats like Barney Kessel and Wes Montgomery along the way. There is also much to admire in the guitarist's wistful exploration of "Danny Boy", which Scofield claims is "everybody's favorite song if they're being honest." That is a stretch, but one can definitely still be moved by this performance.

Somewhat troubling, perhaps, is Scofield's over-reliance on his admittedly impressive vibrato. A little goes a long way and there is a lot more than a little throughout this otherwise stellar recording.

For more information, visit ecmrecords.com. Scofield is at Blue Note Sep. 27th-Oct. 2nd. See Calendar.



Valse Sinistre
Billy Drummond and Freedom Of Ideas
(Cellar Music Group)
by Phil Freeman

It is astonishing that Billy Drummond hasn't made an album under his own name in over 25 years, but it is true. His last release as a leader was 1996's *Dubai*, an ass-kicking quartet date with saxophonists Chris Potter and Walt Weiskopf and bassist Peter Washington. It featured a few new pieces (one by Drummond

himself, two by Weiskopf, one by Potter) and some relative obscurities by Irving Berlin, Pat Metheny, Dewey Redman and Billy Strayhorn. He has kept busy in the interval, of course; no one with this much talent is going to be sitting around long.

This album puts him in the Art Blakey-esque position of corralling three players many years younger than himself. Drummond is 63 while saxophonist Dayna Stephens is 44, bassist Dezron Douglas is 41 and pianist Micah Thomas is just 25. The session was produced by trumpeter Jeremy Pelt.

As on *Dubai*, the tunes come from all over, with only two new pieces: "Never Ends" by Thomas and Drummond's "Changes for Trane & Monk". The others are Jackie McLean's "Little Melonae", starting things off on a bebop note; a smoky treatment of the David Raksin ballad "Laura"; Carla Bley's rarely recorded title track; Grachan Moncur III's "Frankenstein"; Frank Kimbrough's "Clara's Room"; Stanley Cowell's "Reconfirmed"; and Tony Williams' "Lawra". Moncur, Kimbrough and Cowell have all died within the last two years, making this album a particularly potent tribute to large swaths of the music's history.

The performances aren't soaked in mood-killing reverence, however. The tunes are treated like tunes, not collections of chords, and the structures, particularly "Frankenstein", seem to inspire them to leap around and bounce off one another. Stephens switches between tenor and soprano and Thomas occasionally has a remarkably vibraphone-like percussiveness. Douglas is a thick supporting column in the middle of it all and Drummond's playing has a vibrant energy, even when just brushing his way through a ballad. It is good to have him back as a leader.

For more information, visit cellarlive.com. Drummond is at Smalls Sep. 23rd-24th. See Calendar.



A Midsummer Odyssey (featuring Ben Monder)
Randal Despommier (Sunnyside)
by Marco Cangiano

This is an album by an up-and-coming alto saxophonist to an almost forgotten jazz hero. Let's start with Randal Despommier, a New Orleans-born and New York-adopted artist who captured listeners' attention with his daring 2020 debut *Dio c'e'*. He is not only an accomplished player but also a teacher, composer and jazz historian. Which leads us to Lars Gullin, to whom the record is dedicated and whose compositions are featured. Gullin was a baritone saxophonist from Sweden who never set foot in the United States and died at 48 in 1976, but not before leaving behind a legacy of exciting recordings and bop-inspired compositions, many of which were inspired by Swedish folksong. It is thus no surprise to find out that quite a few of Gullin's compositions later had lyrics added.

The connection between the two apparently very distant musicians was sparked by a casual encounter that took place in 2005 when Despommier heard Gullin's "Danny's Dream" for the first time. Fast forward then to 2021, when Despommier rediscovered Gullin's compositions and decided to record some of them in duo with guitarist Ben Monder. The result is an outstanding inner look not only at Gullin's poetic world but also at Despommier's talent and deep understanding and appreciation of the jazz tradition.

The music is mainly melodic and lyrical, inevitably recalling the "Cool" era. Despommier has been

compared to Paul Desmond but it is Lee Konitz who really comes to mind thanks to his essentially angular lines. Monder is a wonder in his capacity to blend, support and drive. His basslines are reminiscent of Billy Bauer, another unsung jazzier whose contributions should be rediscovered much as Gullin's.

Opener "Toka Voka Oka Boka" sets the scene with Monder's mysterious harmonies leading to Despommier's bouncing lines. The ballads "Danny's Dream" (dedicated by Gullin to his son), "Silhouette" and "I Hope It's Spring for You" stand out as they capture Gullin's understated melancholy through Konitz' lens as Despommier and Monder trade and weave melodic lines. But there are also plenty of joyous moments, such as the bossa nova-inspired "I min smala säng" and "BBC Blues", a lively boppish take on the 12-bar traditional form. This is a wonderful recording and much-deserved tribute to Gullin's music.

For more information, visit sunnysiderecords.com. This project is at Soapbox Gallery Sep. 29th. See Calendar.



Mesmerism
Tyshawn Sorey (Yeros7 Music)
by George Grella

The frustration with Tyshawn Sorey's parallel careers as both pre-eminent jazz drummer and important contemporary classical composer is that one has to wait patiently for something new in one area even while enjoying his latest accomplishment in the other. But now, with excellent timing, comes this recent piano trio album ahead of the opening of his major new work *Monochromatic Light (Afterlife)*, staged by Peter Sellars at the Park Avenue Armory the end of this month.

Mesmerism is his second self-released album, following the magnificent *Unfiltered*. It is, in a word, fantastic, and in another, illuminating. One always hears new jazz piano trios with the hopes that they will inaugurate a longterm musical relationship on par with those from Keith Jarrett and Fred Hersch and the talent here, pianist Aaron Diehl and bassist Matt Brewer, is on that level. This group is imaginative, flexible, tightly coordinated while focused enough to expand on the unexpected without every losing their way.

By design, the musicians had very little rehearsal and never performed together before this session. While laying out themes and improvising, one hears them listening to one another, forming the ideal group phrasing around individual ideas, like playing musical exquisite corpse, and coming out with perfect balance and coherence. Diehl has the lead voice and it is a pleasure to hear him pull together so many things—George Gershwin, Herbie Nichols, Robert Glasper—and come out with unique and often gorgeous transformations of standards.

Because that is the other draw here and it is a deep one: how does Sorey lead a group playing standards like "Autumn Leaves" and "Detour Ahead" and tunes by Horace Silver, Paul Motian and others? There is something about hearing a great artist use brushes on the snare, splash the cymbal on the same beat Motian would have. It is a great artist listening and responding to the same music so many jazz heads love. More than just the sheer sound of this album, there is the feeling of Sorey and Co. sharing what we all love.

For more information, visit tyshawn-sorey.bandcamp.com. Sorey is at Smoke Sep. 15th-18th with Vijay Iyer and Park Avenue Armory Sep. 27th-Oct. 8th. See Calendar.