

CD REVIEWS //

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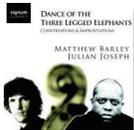
NEW RELEASES //A-Z

Matthew Barley /Julian Joseph

Dance Of The Three Legged Elephant

Signum Classics SIGCD171 | ★★★★★

Matthew Barley (c) and Julian Joseph (p). Rec. 2-4 Mar 2009



The young virtuoso of the cello has been straddling styles and fields of activity for a while, but this is probably his most jazz-oriented venture yet. Barley's execution and quality of invention are exceptional and, even though there's occasional use of extended techniques (as opposed to "effects"), most excitement is achieved via a conventional approach, much of it with the bow rather than pizzicato. Joseph, heard at album length for the first time in too long, is obviously expert and equally successful at taking the role of sensitive accompanist a lot of the time. Some tracks are classified as improvisations but the majority are identifiable pieces, often with highly singable melodies. Even when auditioning initially without benefit of a set-list, the Ravel 'Pièce en Forme de Habanera' stuck out as being played more "straight" than the rest, but its presence here underlines the stylistic continuity with Jobim, McLaughlin and even Jaco Pastorius' 'Used To Be A Cha Cha'. Sadly, from the information available, it's still unclear which track has the same title as the album, but the image aptly conjures up apparently unequal forces combining to create a captivating sound. **Brian Priestley**

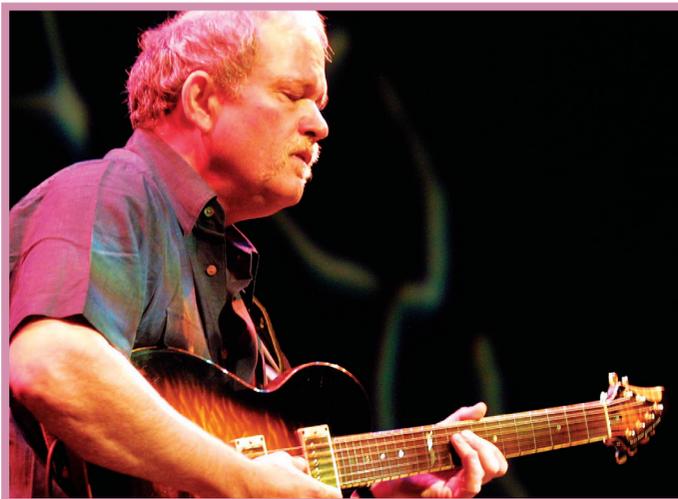
George Benson

Songs and Stories

Concord | ★★

George Benson (g, v) **Greg Phillinganes**, **Patti Austin**, **David Paich** (kys), **Tom Scott**, **Gerald Albright** (saxes), **Lee Ritenour**, **Steve Lukather**, **Wah Wah Watson**, **Norman Brown**, **Jabu** (g) and **John Robinson** (d). Rec. date not given

Heavyweight singer and player that he undoubtedly is, George Benson has also made some pretty bland recordings at regular points in his career and despite an all-star cast, that's what happens here. It's hard to isolate what makes this such a weak jazz album. The opening track, 'Don't Let Me Be Lonely Tonight', has pleasing vocals and guitar work by the main man but hints of overproduction – cloying strings overdubbed for just a few notes hear and there – are already hovering like marshmallow clouds on the horizon. These swiftly cover the whole sky, turning the project into a saccharine smooth-jazz heaven. 'Family Reunion', with its whispering background vocals, soft organ chords and swirling underwater drums, is by Rod Temperton, who wrote Benson's biggest hit, 'Gimme the Night'. Enough said. Lalah Hathaway guests on 'Just a Telephone Call Away' but everything is in that loping mid-tempo that gradually sends you to sleep. Even



John Abercrombie Quartet

Wait Till You See Her

ECM 21021 | ★★★★★

John Abercrombie (g), **Mark Feldman** (vln), **Thomas Morgan** (b) and **Joey Baron** (d). Rec. December 2008

The guitarist's fourth album with this quartet, and can it really be his twenty-sixth, for ECM? The only difference in the line up this time being the fast maturing young Dave Binney/Steve Coleman bassist Thomas Morgan standing in for Abercrombie's long-time bass partner Marc Johnson, who was on the previous three. Yet the album contains a similarly liberated dialogue of ideas filtered through the kind of standard-like themes, contemporary post-bop, abstract free-form and ECM-stamped chamber jazz that marked the guitarist's previous quartet albums. Virtuoso violinist Mark Feldman at times sounds close to the more elegiac side of Stéphane Grappelli's playing, but always energetically charged with a richly expression-laden vein of classical and country music influences. The Rodgers and Hart standard 'Wait Till You See Her' is the only non-original, while the final track 'Chic of Araby' hails from Abercrombie's pioneering work in the 1970s jazz-rock era, a kind of Velvet Underground-meets-Mahavishnu indo-psych groover. Yet even that track is full of the type of tippy-toe intimacy that the group brings to most of this set. It's the kind of non-attention seeking jazz that has rewards aplenty for those prepared to snuggle up close enough. **Selwyn Harris**

Benson's guitar duel with Norman Brown, who idolises him, is strangulated by a smooth tsunami of goo. Laidback to beyond the horizontal, this is an album recommended only to the most dedicated Benson swooners. **Jack Massarik**

Stefano Bollani Trio

Stone In The Water

ECM 2080/1794161 | ★★★★★

Stefano Bollani (p), **Jesper Bodilsen** (b) and **Morten Lund** (d). Rec. 23-24 Oct 2008

Bollani has made quite a name for himself in recent years, since he broached the international scene under the tutelage of trumpeter Enrico Rava. Interestingly, he first played in Denmark through the JazzPar award to Rava, who not only featured Bollani on his prizewinner's concert but was encouraged to use Danish nationals Bodilsen and Lund as his rhythm section. Their playing here is collaborative rather than grandstanding and, though Bodilsen contributes two originals, it's on Bollani's own 'Asuda' that the bassist is most prominently featured. Material from outside the trio consists of two lesser-known standards by Jobim and Veloso

and a lyrical adaptation of French composer Poulenc. It's possible to speculate that Bollani will eventually find a truly distinctive style, whether this will have a regional content or not. Certainly, you wonder if anyone hearing this in a Blindfold Test would identify the pianist as being Italian (still less the rhythm-section as Danish), but you can also seriously wonder if any of that matters, when the playing is this good. **Brian Priestley**

Anouar Brahem

The Astounding Eyes Of Rita

ECM 20751 | ★★★★★

Brahem (oud), **Klaus Gesing** (b ctt), **Bjorn Meyer** (b) and **Khaled Yassine** (darbouka, bendir). Rec. 2008

Although the body of work that the Tunisian oud player has created in the past decade or so has impressive entries in the shape of *Le Pas Du Chat Noir* and *Astrakan Café*, it is perhaps *Thimar*, the trio session with John Surman and Dave Holland, that stands as a possible chef d'oeuvre. Part of the magic came from the timbral combination of Sumrnan's bass clarinet and Brahem's oud, the nasal burr

of the former and the steely tingle of the latter nesting into one another as if to the manner born. To a certain extent that relationship again proves decisive here, although Klaus Gesing is a different, perhaps more understated presence than Surman was. That said, the continuity with previous Brahem work is the lightness of touch with which the pieces are executed, the largely Middle Eastern modal structures being a basis for spare, condensed improvisations, and the charm of much of the music comes from the extremely careful placement of the solo flourish. For the most part the ensemble plays melodies for long passages before releasing a variation on the theme and that can be all the more effective for it. Also playing a key role is Khaled Yassine's excellent darbouka, which provides a tightly channelled dynamism without upsetting the balance of the strings and reed, his crisp, almost bongo like eighth notes lend a dancing flutter to the leisurely, ambling pulse of most of the songs. Perhaps the writing lacks a touch of Brahem's usual phrasal richness but there is a solemn beauty in the work that makes for worthwhile contemplation in the remains of the day. **Kevin Le Grand**

Stu Brown Sextet

Twisted Toons: The Music of Raymond Scott

Lickety-Splat LS001 | ★★★★★

Stu Brown (d, cel, xy), **tub bells**, **toys**, **toy typewriter**), **Tom MacLiven** (t), **Brian Molloy** (bs, ts, as, ss, ctt, toys), **Martin Kershaw** (clt, drumhorn), **Tom Gibbs** (p) and **Roy Percy** (b). Rec. 15-16 April 2009

Bandleader and inventor Raymond Scott (1908-1994) is a fascinating and somewhat neglected figure, so Stu Brown and his touring sextet are doing sterling work in restoring Scott's compositions and inspirations to public attention. A proto-bebopper who abhorred improvisation (Bunny Berigan played trumpet in his quintette but quit in frustration at the lack of space for self-expression), Scott went on to produce an early version of the synthesiser and, through his electronic experiments, in some degree pioneered ambient and minimalist music. It's mostly Scott's "descriptive jazz" – oddball, highly pictorial writing that was extremely popular with adult audiences in the 1930s and that was then adopted for *Looney Tunes* cartoons and the like in the 1940s – that's featured here, faithfully re-created using arrangements and solos mostly based on the originals and recorded using a single stereo ribbon microphone placed in the middle of the room. The final two tracks are devoted to Scott's later experiments: the six-saxophone 'The Bass-Line Generator' takes its cue from a Scott invention that generated musical patterns from a 10-note tone row, while 'Toy Typewriter' is based on a hypnotic Scott track that originally ran to 17 minutes on