

Reid Anderson

Abolish Bad Architecture

Fresh Sound New Talent Reissue Liner Notes

On one level, as bassist and composer Reid Anderson recalls, *Abolish Bad Architecture* was “just another low-budget jazz session,” knocked out in a matter of hours by a superbly talented quartet in 1999. After that, Anderson remembers the band playing only one gig, a record release event at Smalls. (Jeff Ballard has apparently unearthed a cassette from that night.) “It wasn’t a band that had been working on this music live or anything,” Anderson says. “And that was par for the course for a lot of young jazz musicians because it was so hard to get gigs. We’d put together an ambitious set of material, we’d go document it, and then that was it.”

Yet listening back after 20 years, the historical resonance of this album and the one that preceded it, Anderson’s 1997 debut *Dirty Showtunes* (with nearly the same lineup), has only grown. They capture vivid and important aspects of a jazz scene in bloom, featuring players whose careers would continue to interweave as they went from success to success.

Ethan Iverson and the leader would soon reunite on Fresh Sound New Talent with The Bad Plus, a trio that made waves far beyond anyone’s expectations and continues to thrive and evolve. Ballard and Mark Turner joined forces in Fly, another exceptional trio (playing a chordless rendition of “Todas Las Cosas Se Van,” the leadoff track from *Abolish Bad Architecture*, on their self-titled 2004 debut for Savoy). Iverson and Turner, for their part, became members of the acclaimed Billy Hart Quartet and made a gripping piano/tenor duo album for ECM called *Temporary Kings*. And Anderson himself rejoined Ballard, playing electronics (not bass), on the drummer’s vibrant 2019 Edition release *Fairgrounds*.

After *Abolish Bad Architecture*, Anderson underwent what he calls “a very conscious and discernible shift” with his third FSNT release, *The Vastness of Space* (2000), toward the more triadic and rock-edged language he would develop with The Bad Plus. (Two tunes from *Vastness*, “Prehensile Dream” and “Silence Is the Question,” became part of The Bad Plus book.) As a result, the bassist remarks, “Those first two [quartet] albums stand alone. It was me taking a stab at a certain style, the sound of New York at the time. It was actually the first music I ever really wrote, and I’ll hold it up against any record of any of ours, as far as a document of the four of us playing at the highest level, working in that sort of time-specific genre — these complex, thorny, epic ’90s jazz tunes. But I got it out of my system in a way, and then I cleared the slate. I wanted to start over. Whatever you can say my style is, I think it really began with *The Vastness of Space*.”

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As a title, in Anderson’s words, *Abolish Bad Architecture* “lands with a thud.” (It’s a bit reminiscent of Mingus’s “Remember Rockefeller at Attica.”) Simply put, it’s something Anderson just wanted to say, reflecting his view that “the outer landscape we create for ourselves has an effect on our inner landscape. I do think titles are important in that they give you a place to start from, in terms of your emotional relationship to the music.”

That is why “Todas Las Cosas Se Van” (roughly “all things must pass”), a poetic lyric by Guillermo Klein, became (with Klein’s permission) an Anderson song title. (The origin is “Se Me Va La Voz” from Klein’s *Los Guachos II*, which features Ballard on percussion, plus three members of the *Vastness of Space* band.) Just like the “thud” of the album title, Ballard’s dramatic snare thwacks and the fast, irregular unisons from piano and tenor catch the ear off-guard from the start. The way the band takes charge of the challenging form, darkly hued harmony and tricky rhythmic contours gives a clear idea of the level of musicianship being achieved on the New York scene in this period.

“Miró,” inspired by the Spanish painter, is a loose rubato reverie with poignant melodic outlines, prompting band interplay in a freer, more collectively improvised vein, with adventurous

solos by Iverson and Turner. (“I was proud of that one,” Anderson says — proud enough to revive the tune on Ballard’s *Fairgrounds*, in a radically different and fascinating treatment.) The melodic integrity and beauty of Anderson’s pen comes through as well in “Shimmering,” the shortest track but one of the most haunting, a ballad with Anderson as the main soloist.

Stretching out nearly 10 minutes on the title track, the band rises to meet the demands of another energetic piece on the order of “Todas Las Cosas.” Iverson and Turner are mesmerizing in the precision of their unison passages. Turner’s solo epitomizes the individuality and technical depth of his approach and the urgency of his voice on the horn, to this day one of the most influential sounds in jazz. Iverson’s expansive flight is fluid and zig-zagging in all the right ways, steeped in a piano lineage he has studied and written about so astutely on his blog *Do the Math* and also in *The New Yorker*.

Anderson starts alone on “Every Day Is Beautiful,” and what emerges is a mysteriously swinging midtempo piece with fine piano and tenor solos. The title came from something Anderson used to hear his downstairs neighbor say when greeted with, “How are you today?” And pay close attention to Ballard’s ride cymbal on the doleful, hovering “Mystery Girl”: it’s the only part of the drum set he plays, lending the whole take a certain airiness but also a slight feeling of unease. “That’s a really notable choice that he made, quite a bold and brilliant move,” Anderson comments.

“Granada” evokes a day off in that Spanish city, where Anderson once roamed by himself, having taken a bus from his lodgings in Malaga. And “Homage: Mahler” is exactly that, with a very clear quote snuck in from the Adagietto of Mahler’s Symphony No. 5. “As sprawling as Mahler’s music is, he has these incredibly beautiful melodies that evolve and transform and extend,” Anderson says. “In a way, this tune maybe signaled the next phase a little bit: it was kind of my first rock-beat tune, very stripped down and simple but if you dug deep there was more there. That’s what I was going for.”

When you ponder how many gigs, how many studio sessions, how many *notes* Anderson and friends have played since this date in 1999, you wonder whether *Abolish Bad Architecture* was for them just a blip, its particular ins and outs all just a hazy memory. But it left a deep imprint, along with other FSNT releases by Iverson, Chris Cheek, Bill McHenry, Kurt Rosenwinkel and others in this tight circle of groundbreaking players. “Fresh Sound was important for so many people,” Anderson maintains. “It gave a lot of musicians a chance to put out a record who might have never gotten that chance, myself definitely included.” That his engaging and important music found a home, and once again finds new life in the vinyl you’re holding, is something to celebrate.

— David R. Adler