

Cont'd from page 133

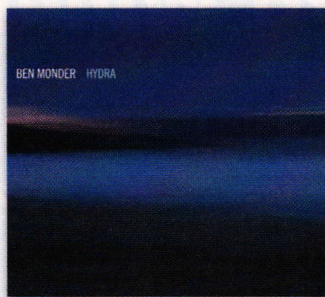
although this is probably no one's fault. The original master tapes are 50 to 60 years old.

So why bother with the Bethlehems? Because they contain permanent music that had gone missing in the shadows of time.

Booker Ervin is one of the great, lost figures in the history of jazz, the best of the "Texas tenors": tough, gruff, commanding, up to his thick eyeglasses in the blues. Before he died at 39, he was a dominating force on some of Charles Mingus's best albums, and made classics of his own on Prestige (*The Freedom Book*, *The Blues Book*). *The Book Cooks* may be his debut as a leader, and may be from 1960. (Bethlehem does not clarify these points.) Ervin preaches in "The Blue Book" with soul-stirring authority. So does trumpeter Tommy Turrentine, yet another special player in danger of being forgotten. Ervin smokes the title track, shows his romantic (tough-love) side in "Largo," and turns "Poor Butterfly," that delicate song, into a wild wail. In Ervin's presence, Tommy Flanagan, normally the most urbane of pianists, gets so funky he could be from Texas.

Every Bethlehem release contains at least one oddity. On the Ervin album it is Zoot Sims showing up as a sideman. Ervin's influence makes Sims, that master of relaxed, cool California swing, sound hot enough to have relatives in Texas.

What are unusual about the Mingus album are the central role of Jackson Wiley's cello, the classical formalism of Mingus's writing, and the subdued tone. Pieces like "Minor Intrusion" and "Thrice Upon a Theme" are intricate notated designs, carefully planned. Still, jazz wins out. Thad Jones and John LaPorta (an obscure, brilliant alto saxophonist) take vivid, lyrical solos. There are two standards, creatively reinterpreted. In "Stormy Weather," LaPorta's arrangement makes a sextet sound orchestral, surrounding Jones's golden trumpet fire with multiple contrasting colors and deep textures. In "What Is This Thing Called Love," Mingus's chart sets into motion three distinct melodic lines, sometimes consonant, sometimes not. These *Jazz Experiments* are minor Mingus, but even minor Mingus needs to be in circulation. —Thomas Conrad



BEN MONDER *Hydra*

Ben Monder, guitars; John Patitucci, Skúli Sverrisson, bass; Ted Poor, drums; Theo Bleckmann, Martha Cluver, Gian Slater, voice
Sunnyside SSC 1357 (CD). 2013. Ben Monder, prod.; Joe Branciforte, prod., eng., mix. DDD. TT: 78:26

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★
SONICS ★★★★★

Guitarist Ben Monder hadn't weighed in as a bandleader since his 2005 epic, *Oceana*. So with *Hydra* he aims characteristically big, offering nearly 80 minutes of music, including the 24-minute, through-composed title track. It's clear from the opening "Elysium," with its startling sped-up arpeggios on acoustic guitar, why the album took eight years. Many of the rippling, register-leaping parts on *Hydra* seem all but unplayable, yet Monder makes them fluid and texturally full.

The fantastical *Hydra* also owes much to singer and longtime Monder collaborator Theo Bleckmann, whose wordless legato lines and multitracked harmonies combine with a powerful rhythm section to create art songs you could doubt are from this galaxy. Two additional singers underscore how central the human voice is to Monder's musical vision.

Blending acoustic and electric guitars throughout, Monder puts his staggering virtuosity in the service of imagination, creating lyrical calm and spooky, medieval-sounding strangeness ("Postlude," with all three singers and no drums). Still, *Hydra* grooves, and the big, thuddy kick-drum sound of Ted Poor provides a sonic focal point, not least in the distorted chamber-metal screamer "Tredecadrome." As always, Monder favors electric bass, but in a supportive role, not out front for solos.

In jazz terms, this is a composer's record, yet Monder rapturously improvises in the ballad "Yugen" and elsewhere. The sound captures every intimate string squeak, fat bass tone, warp-speed ensemble passage, and ghostly vocal swell. —David R. Adler

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