



Meltframe
Mary Halvorson (Firehouse 12)
by David R. Adler

This release by Mary Halvorson is doubly unusual in that it is a solo guitar CD and a collection of material solely by other composers. But these solo meditations end up transforming the music in turn. *Meltframe* plays out as a kind of many-layered tribute, a fresh attempt to unite diverse threads and find a common entry point. Only one piece, Noël Akchoté's loosely folksy and melodic "Cheshire Motel" (from the 1996 Sam Rivers/Noël Akchoté/Tony Hymas/Paul Rogers/Jacques Thollot album *Configuration*), is by a fellow guitarist.

Halvorson opens at full blast with Oliver Nelson's "Cascades", a corkscrew minor blues head she all but obliterates with grinding fuzz-tone and a spasmodic staccato delivery. As an opener it's perplexing and not very representative of the rest. When Halvorson comes later to McCoy Tyner's "Aisha", the fuzz-tone wall of sound returns, but only as a brief and deliberately jarring tangent. Otherwise her tone is clean, her harmonic palette more subtle and alluring, as it is on much of the disc. It's worth noting that her "Aisha" owes less to the original *Olé Coltrane* version and more to the freer solo piano interpretations of Tyner himself (e.g., *Counterpoints* from 1978).

There are no noise-rock outbursts during Duke Ellington's "Solitude", one of several tracks where Halvorson outlines a lyrical chord-melody approach marked by a wide oscillating volume swells or tremolos. Wobbly pitch-shifting and harmonizer effects, with an otherwise dry amplified tone, have also become a Halvorson signature—they're powerfully present on the closing rendition of Roscoe Mitchell's "Leola", a stately minor-key theme from *Nine to Get Ready* (1997). On Ornette Coleman's "Sadness", from *Town Hall* 1962, she summons rattling and buzzing timbres with what is presumably a slide. It's brilliant: she seems to emulate the arco of bassist David Izenzon or perhaps even the heart-rending portamento of Coleman's alto saxophone.

Halvorson also makes the case for current young composers, choosing "Platform" from bassist Chris Lightcap's recent *Epicenter*. She identifies something more explicitly raw in the tune—call it Lightcap meets Soundgarden. Second to last is Tomas Fujiwara's "When", originally a 10-minute epic on *After All Is Said* by

the drummer's band The Hook Up. On that version Halvorson played a three-minute solo intro; the *Meltframe* example could almost be a second take, but with a more intimate, less reverby sound.

That the legacy of the late Paul Bley seeps into *Meltframe* more than once is bittersweet following the piano legend's death last month. "Blood", from Annette Peacock's radical 1972 opus *I'm the One* (which featured Bley on synthesizer), evolves as a mournful rubato ode, replete with Halvorson's distinct wavering tremolo. Carla Bley's "Ida Lupino", famously played by Bley in 1965 on *Closer* and throughout his career, takes on a quasi-rock flavor at a majestic medium tempo. It's the one song that Halvorson plays with no effects whatsoever.

For more information, visit firehouse12records.com. Halvorson is at The Stone Feb. 4th and 12th and Ibeam Brooklyn Feb. 7th. See Calendar.



Written in the Rocks
Renee Rosnes (Smoke Sessions)
by Andrew Velez

Consistently notable for the variety and adventurousness of her playing and writing, Canadian pianist Renee Rosnes has been recording since the '90s. The bulk of her latest venture is an ambitious new suite, "The Galapagos Suite", named for the island chain off of South America, which inspired Darwin's theory of evolution and our own ever-evolving understanding of it.

The album begins with "The KT Boundary" (the point in between the Cretaceous and Tertiary periods some 65 million years ago), a prologue for the mass extinction of the dinosaurs and most other life on the planet at the time. Rather than focusing on the disaster, it is the blossoming of new life that comes through the music. Here and throughout saxophonist/flutist Steve Wilson gives joyful life to the unfolding epic as does Steve Nelson, whose luminous vibraphone playing sounds as if it is pouring out of Rosnes' keyboard.

The poignancy of Wilson's flute contrasts with the swinging drums of Bill Stewart on "Deep in the Blue", a melody which suggests both the ocean and the land. "So Simple a Beginning" builds from a single note to a complex chord as Rosnes reaches to express the very origins of life on Earth. Her sounds are fresh and friendly, with off-center phrasing at once complex and yet utterly uncluttered, such as the motifs played by Rosnes and longtime cohort bassist Peter Washington on "Lucy From Afar", evoking the first tentative footsteps of one of our first ancestors walking.

The suite concludes with "Cambrian Explosion", a telling of the burst of life over 500 million years ago, which gave rise to most of the species alive today. The seismic event is characterized with a spiky, atonal line gaining momentum. The focus bounces from one instrument to another, ending in a closely-knit collective improvisation by all.

Two originals unrelated to the Suite close the album. "Goodbye to Mumbai" a jazzy piece, recalls Rosnes' first visit to India in 2013, after discovering that her biological mother was of Punjabi heritage. "From Here to a Star" builds on the harmony of Irving Berlin's classic "How Deep is the Ocean". Washington and Stewart quietly add to the stargazing mood of the piece. It's all ear-opening music.

For more information, visit smokesessionsrecords.com. This project is at Smoke Feb. 5th-7th. See Calendar.

UNEARTHED GEM



All My Yesterdays:
The Debut 1966 Recordings at the Village Vanguard
Thad Jones/Mel Lewis Orchestra (Resonance)
by Duck Baker

All My Yesterdays captures one of the greatest modern big bands live on the occasion of its first-ever public performance and again six weeks later. 50 years on, a version of the same band is still holding forth on Monday nights at the same venue. The historic value could not be higher, the packaging is superb and the sound quality excellent. But the reason this release is a must is the performances themselves, which beg the question of how any band could ever sound this good right out of the starting gate with material this complex. Resonance founder George Klabin was barely more than a neophyte as a sound engineer when he was asked to record the band live so they could have a demo for a record deal and the balance he was able to get speaks volumes for his capabilities. Fans of the Orchestra have already been treated to several Jones/Lewis live recordings from the late '60s, but this one feels 'liver' than any of the others. We hear not only exhortations from the audience but also from the bandstand. It's almost like being onstage, especially on the first night's recordings.

Alto saxophonist Jerry Dodgion kicks off the opening "Back Bone" on his own, with Jones calling the band in at the end of the third chorus with one of his trademark chords, which seems to have every horn hitting a different note and we are off and running. Those who know other recordings will appreciate a lot of subtle and not-so-subtle changes in how the arrangements are played here, one reason Jones-Lewis fans shouldn't be concerned about whether they already 'know' the material. Indeed, it is only the chance to hear different readings that gives us any hope of scratching the surface of Jones' writing. An even more obvious reason for those who have the other records to pick this up is that the level of soloing is very high. What else would one expect from Pepper Adams, Joe Farrell, Jerome Richardson, Hank Jones, Tommy McIntosh, etc.?

The music is enhanced by page after page of testimonials by former band members, which not only give an idea of what playing in the band was like, but also help us glimpse some of the inner workings. For instance, Lewis has often been described as a perfect big band drummer, but having the people who worked with him break down what made him special helps us really hear it. The improvisational style of Jones as a leader is also remembered by several commentators. For all that he put into writing the arrangements, he left room not just for soloists but also for other players or sections to ad-lib riffs or counterpoint lines. The fuller picture that emerges helps explain the palpable excitement we can feel in the room when this band first took the stage half a century ago.

For more information, visit resonancerecords.org. The Vanguard Jazz Orchestra is at Village Vanguard Feb. 1st-8th, with the official 50th Anniversary Celebration taking place Feb. 8th. See Calendar.

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