



SPIDER BAGS
Frozen Letter

Merge MRG521 (CD). 2014. Dan McGee, prod.; Wesley Wolfe, prod., eng., mix. AAD? TT: 33:59

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★

SONICS ★★★★★

Sometimes, brevity is a *good* thing. I don't mean brevity as a respite from some ordeal; I mean brevity as satisfaction, like the best piece of Key lime pie you've ever eaten and that resulting warm glow in your tummy.

Chapel Hill's Spider Bags, on their fourth full-length, have found the special sauce, and it takes 'em only half an hour to dish it out. Together in varying incarnations since 2005, the group is the musical vision of Dan McGee, whose previous efforts hewed primarily to wobbly, eccentric, punk-inflected garage rock but now, abetted by Tarheel producer-engineer extraordinaire Wesley Wolfe, conjures up something altogether more immediate.

The album has the feeling of an intimate club gig, as in the pounding opening track, "Back with You Again in the World," which presses the listener right up against the monitors—or the contrasting slide into psychedelic freak folk that is "Walking Bubble" (everybody take a deep breath and sit down on the floor in front of the stage). Yet Spider Bags also remain a riotous romp; nor will garage acolytes go away disappointed, with the presence of under-three-minute nuggets like fuzz anthem "Chem Trails" and distorto-twang raveup "Japanese Vacation." Even in those, though, McGee and Wolfe keep things sonically interesting, ladling out dollops of reverb and echo and setting the stereo effects knob to Pan.

By the time this brief album ends, you've been yanked and caressed, shoved and hugged. You stagger away like a happy drunk at the end of a night on the town. *Frozen Letter* melts in your mind, not in your hands.

—Fred Mills

JAZZ



ORAN ETKIN
Gathering Light

Oran Etkin, bass clarinet, clarinet, tenor saxophone; Curtis Fowlkes, trombone; Lionel Loueke, guitar, vocals; Ben Allison, bass; Nasheet Waits, drums. Motéma Music MTM-141 (CD). 2014. Oran Etkin, prod.; Aaron Nevezle, eng. DDD. TT: 55:56

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★

SONICS ★★★★★

An Israeli-born, American-raised multireedist, Oran Etkin brings a global perspective to small-group jazz on *Gathering Light*, the follow-up to his promising 2009 debut, *Kelenia*. Just over half the program is original, but Etkin also includes songs from Hebrew, Yiddish, Chinese, and Indonesian sources. He closes with a nod to polyglot New Orleans, offering Louis Armstrong's signature song "When It's Sleepy Time Down South" on clarinet, joined by bassist Ben Allison and drummer Nasheet Waits in a sparse, reflective trio mood.

It's that New Orleans influence, and an African tinge made more explicit on *Kelenia*, that also pushes Etkin's music in a harder-grooving direction. In "Gratitude," and the companion originals "Taxi Dance" and "Guangzhou Taxi," guitarist Lionel Loueke and trombonist Curtis Fowlkes are in brilliant form, expanding the core trio to a high-intensity quintet. Allison and Etkin sound like the band's nerve center in the clarinet-bass duo "All I Really Want to Do Is Dance!," paring down but maintaining the larger group's energy and wiles. It all comes through beautifully on this disc: Loueke's myriad string timbres, the blend of the two horns, the rhythm section's alert but easygoing beat.

Etkin's two tenor-sax features, "Scattering Light" and "Distant Sounds of Change," are marvelous and full of contrast. The unique power of Etkin's B-flat clarinet—in a trio with bass and drums—bursts through in an involved and swinging original, "Tony's Dance," a highlight of this disc. —David R. Adler



INDIGO MIST
*That the Days Go By
and Never Come Again*

Cuong Vu, trumpet; Richard Karpen, piano; six others. RareNoise RNR042 (CD). 2014. Richard Karpen, Cuong Vu, Luke Berman, prods.; Michael McCrea, eng. DDD. TT: 43:32

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★

SONICS ★★★★★

Cuong Vu is a postmodern jazz trumpeter who has been a pioneer in the use of electronics. Richard Karpen is director of the School of Music at the University of Washington, a classical pianist, and a specialist in computer music. When these two got together, the shit hit the fan.

The band they call Indigo Mist includes bassist Luke Berman, drummer Ted Poor, and four "live electronics iPad performers." The album, for Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn, is a tribute like no other. The uninterrupted suite contains movements like "Indigo Mist" and "The Electric Mist," howling tempests of electronic technology. But the four acoustic players are capable of raising hell on their own. "Billy," Karpen's homage to Strayhorn, is mostly for piano trio. Piano figures hang in the air, then implode. "Duke" innocently swings until Berman and Karpen crash in.

When the players land on actual Ellington-Strayhorn tunes, time collapses. Revered history is transformed by now. It is a rush when "A Flower Is a Lovesome Thing" clarifies from the seething of "Indigo Mist." Softly, slowly sung by Vu on trumpet, it is reborn. "In a Sentimental Mood" and "Lush Life" are also startling when they coalesce. They are brief messages in bottles, floating in seas of sound. The final movement sustains for eight minutes the ambivalence of partial acoustic and electronic gestures. Only toward the end, in the long calls of Vu's trumpet, do its fragments align to suggest "Mood Indigo." —Thomas Conrad

continued on page 197