

David Binney Adam Rogers
John Escreet Matt Brewer Eric Harland

Alex Sipiagin

Balance 38-58



Criss Cross Jazz 1378

BALANCE 38-58 ALEX SIPIAGIN

1. **38-58**
(A. Sipiagin) 9.27
2. **WAY TO HER**
(A. Sipiagin) 8.32
3. **MOMENTUM**
(A. Sipiagin) 9.35
4. **ECHOES OF THOUGHT**
(A. Sipiagin) 12.14
5. **BALANCE**
(A. Sipiagin) 6.27
6. **YRAGON**
(D. Binney) 8.23
7. **TRIO WHALE**
(D. Binney) 7.58

ALEX SIPIAGIN trumpet, fluegelhorn
DAVID BINNEY alto & soprano sax
ADAM ROGERS guitar
JOHN ESCREET piano
MATT BREWER bass (acoustic & electric)
ERIC HARLAND drums

Produced by Gerry Teekens
Recording Engineer: Michael Marciano
Mixing: David Darlington
Mastering: David Darlington
Recorded: October 6, 2014
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Balance 38-58

Of the many places in trumpeter **Alex Sipiagin's** busy itinerary over the years, it was the land of Taiwan that inspired the album title **Balance 38-58**. The "balance" part refers to Sipiagin's striving for balance in life, in health — important for any touring jazz musician, pursuing one of the toughest professions there is. The "38-58" part refers to "a Taiwanese drink, like a local vodka," Sipiagin explains. "There's only two Taiwanese national drinks: one is 38 percent, another 58 percent. So this is kind of a word game: between 38 and 58 you can find a balance. It's just imagination. I've spent a lot of time in Asia recently for workshops and festivals, and every time I visit there I find a balance."

Which drink does the trumpeter prefer? "38 is definitely better. 58 is totally deadly."

"Balance" is also a good way to think about the contrapuntal sextet sound that Sipiagin explores on this, his 11th outing as a leader for **Criss Cross**. By its nature, the trumpet often demands to be out in front of the band, transfixing an audience in the Armstrong way. Sipiagin can play that role with relish, in his own work and as a collaborator with Dave Holland, the Mingus Orchestra, Opus 5 and others. He's lent a surefire improvisational spark to albums by fellow **Criss Cross** bandleaders **Manuel Valera**, **Misha Tsiganov** and **Conrad Herwig** as well.

But there's a beauty to blending into the ensemble as well, becoming one voice of several. On albums such as **Mirrors** (Criss 1236), **Equilibrium** (Criss 1257) and **Destinations Unknown** (Criss 1336), Sipiagin has shown an interest in polyphony and intersecting lines, orchestrating multiple horns and piano (or guitar) in ways that brim with tension and intricate modernism. "That's one of my favorite ways to write, to find some kind of counterpoint, second voices," Sipiagin says. The contrast between this approach and the stripped-down quartet sound of his previous **Criss Cross** date **Overlooking Moments** (Criss 1354) is significant.

Alto saxophonist **David Binney**, one of Sipiagin's closest musical associates from the early '90s onward, brings his characteristic intensity to this date and also contributes the final two compositions. Functioning as a soloist but also as a third contrapuntal voice is guitarist **Adam Rogers**, another key musical ally who's played on four previous Sipiagin dates, most recently **Generations: Dedicated to Woody Shaw** (Criss 1325). **Eric Harland**, the drummer of choice on Sipiagin's two previous **Criss Cross** sessions, returns here to mix it up with rising star bassist **Matt Brewer**, who debuted as a leader in 2014 with **Mythology** (Criss 1373).

"I met Matt while we were playing in Gonzalo Rubalcaba's quintet," Sipiagin says. "When I listened to Binney's last record [Anacapa, Criss 1370] and I heard Matt playing electric bass, it actually inspired me to write a lot of the music for this album. Binney suggested that I get [pianist] **John Escreet** as well. Some of the songs I wrote for Rhodes and I'm so glad John was available. He's unbelievable. He's the only one I hadn't really played with before, but I knew his music and he knew mine. He was so well prepared in such a short time and totally took care of business."

The opening **38-58** is "probably the most important tune on the album for me," says Sipiagin. "It represents my latest writing direction, [an extension of] what I did on my previous record From Reality and Back for Gonzalo's label. Most of the tunes came out of my experiences in different countries, and all of them came out while practicing my instrument. The melodies just came out of my trumpet, and **38-58** is definitely one of those." A showcase for nearly the whole band, the tune opens in a funky, complex midtempo feel marked by multi-textured Rhodes and guitar underneath brisk and angular horn lines. Sipiagin leads off the solos, followed by Rogers, Escreet, Binney and finally a sizzling Harland on the outro vamp.

Way to Her finds Sipiagin playing flugelhorn, interweaving with Binney in a mellower, more ethereal vein and making Wheeler-esque intervallic leaps during his dramatic solo. Escreet and Brewer both switch to acoustic on this track, giving the music a more restrained and elegant flavor. Rogers' chording under the piano and bass solos manages to be unobtrusive and yet very present, one small example of this band's highly attuned chemistry.

Momentum, according to Sipiagin, is "a more energetic piece that was meant to be played a lot faster, but I realized if I played it faster it would obscure the other voices and lines." One of the tune's most distinctive features, however, is the groove supplied by Harland. "I really like to give freedom to musicians," Sipiagin continues. "Originally I was thinking more of a swing feel, but then Eric said, 'Why don't you groove?' I thought, 'Great!' The same happened on my last couple of records, where Eric suggested a lot, changed a lot of grooves and a lot of moods. I really appreciate when musicians do this."

Sipiagin initially recorded **Echoes of Thoughts** on his 2008 release Out of the Circle, in a version thick with flute and trombone among other colors. This arrangement, more compact but just as powerful, captures some of Sipiagin's finest writing,

where every contrapuntal twist and turn serves a larger melodic development. Binney solos first in a calm but intense mixed-meter flow, followed by Sipiagin back on flugelhorn. Brewer's acoustic bass solo becomes a pivotal point in the track, giving space for Rogers and Escreet to blend chords with extraordinary subtlety before the soaring three-voiced theme returns (with Brewer soloing still). Rogers wails, with an entirely clean sound, over a more static two-chord groove to bring the piece to a close.

Balance, the "half title track" as Sipiagin jokingly calls it, is "a brand new tune I wrote a few months ago, thinking about this setup of musicians. It just represents my mood, trying to keep myself positive and not pay attention to negativity." There's an odd beauty in the soprano sax/trumpet/guitar layering of the melody, the asymmetric phrase shapes and distinct harmonic rhythm, the tone of the trumpet almost rich and low enough to mistake for trombone. Escreet's connection with Harland and Brewer, his way of finding just the right emphases and departures within the form, make his solo one of the album's unassuming high points.

Both **Trio Whale** and **Yragon** came from Binney understanding just what the session needed and choosing two originals that would best complete it. "He has these sketches," Sipiagin says. "He always writes, he writes nonstop, every day, he has thousands of tunes. Those sketches were meant to be for his last

recording, but he brought them for my recording. He readjusted, mixed it up."

The hard rock riff device of **Trio Whale**, surely a fun one for Rogers, brings "a completely new energy" to the session, "something to refresh [the sound] close to the end of the album." Escreet's silky Rhodes timbre and looser way with the chords brings a certain suppleness to an otherwise hard-driving number, with Rogers' snarling guitar solo the centerpiece. Sipiagin comes in blowing over a brighter major-key vamp section toward the end — a brilliant release after all that dense rock-n-roll. Check out the rhythm section's cohesion on the final few repeats before the closing unison figure.

The atmosphere is airy with pedal points and abstract volume swells from the guitar on **Yragon**, featuring Binney on soprano. After the initial theme the tempo picks up and Rogers and Sipiagin play a virtuosic unison line to set up Escreet as the first soloist. Later, Binney stretches mightily over a climactic series of enigmatic chords, a passage that truly bears his compositional signature. For the outro, which never exactly ends, Sipiagin muses: "I like to leave the coda like it is, as a natural ending. I like to let it be improvised, it's happened on all my records. Let's give the credit to the musicians, they know how to make codas — the guys just finish it, whatever feels right in the moment, sometimes

it's very short, sometimes it's a vamp, sometimes it's going up in energy, sometimes it's fading down. But I think I want to leave it like that."

David R. Adler
New York, December 2014