BEST OF JAZZ EDITORS' PICKS REVIEW

SOLO JAN

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By Editor November 26, 2020 Sticky post

Solo Album Roundup 2020

Article By David R. Adler

★★★★½

Fred Hersch, *Songs from Home* (Palmetto)

★★★★½

Steve Lehman, *Xenakis and the Valedictorian* (Pi)

★★★★½

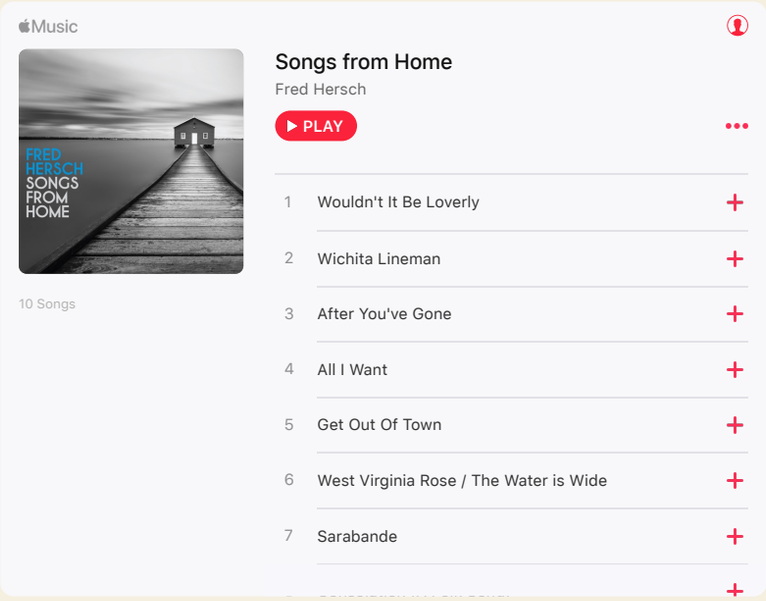
Jorge Roeder, *El Suelo Mío* (T-Town)

★★★★½

Pasquale Grasso, *Solo Bud Powell* (Sony Masterworks)

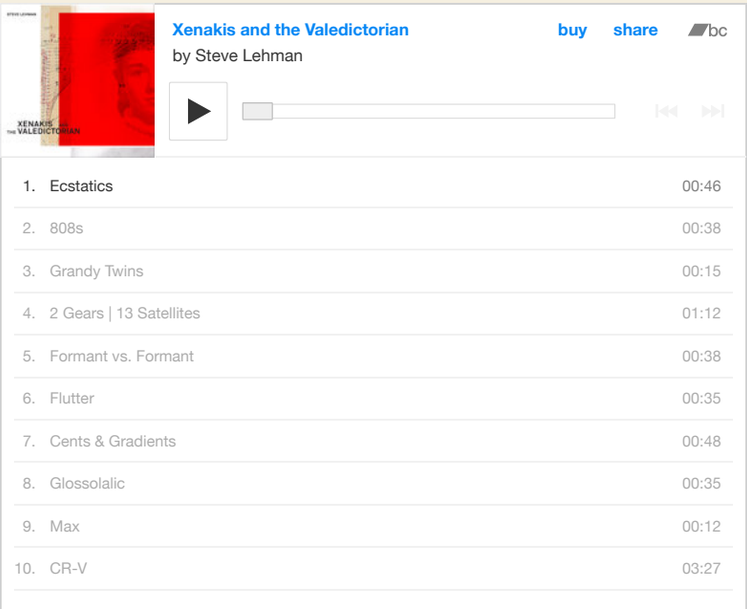
Jazz Artistry Now – It's no mystery why the year 2020 would prompt a good number of solo albums. And yet 2020 isn't unique in that regard: jazz has a legacy of unaccompanied performance stretching back to Jelly Roll Morton, the stride pianists, Art Tatum and so many others. A solo album in 2020, however, calls forth associations and emotions specific to this moment. And musicians who play alone, no matter their instrument, offer a window into their art we might not get otherwise. What follows is a small but representative sampling from a year that hit musicians especially hard.

Under the self-explanatory title *Songs from Home*, the great **Fred Hersch** ventures a solo piano set ranging in song choice from Duke Ellington to Jimmy Webb and Kenny Wheeler, from Cole Porter to Joni Mitchell and the Beatles. "Wouldn't It Be Loverly" is the leadoff track, a song less often played but rich in opportunities for Mr. Hersch's inimitably poetic lyricism. "After You've Gone" and "When I'm Sixty Four" conjure the spirits of Earl Hines and Teddy Wilson and remind us that with this pianist, the history runs deep.



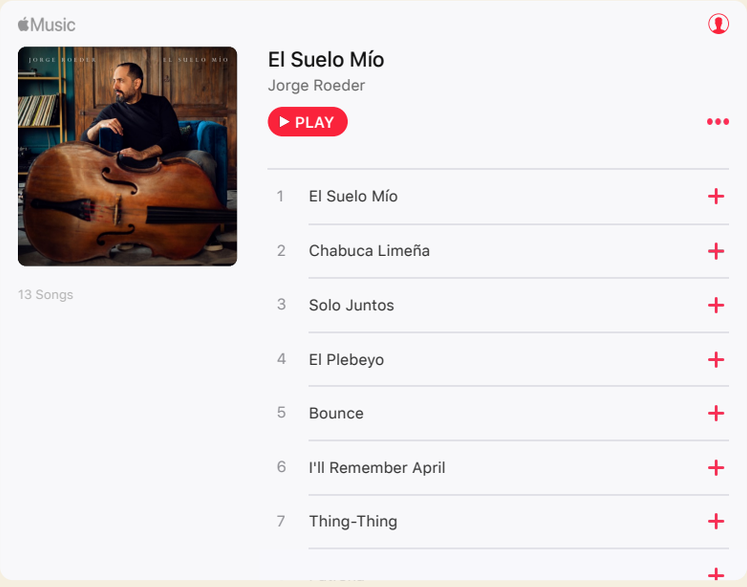
Apprenticeships with the likes of Sam Jones and Joe Henderson, pivotal gigs coming up on the scene at Bradley's: the lessons were imprinted on Mr Hersch's soul long ago, and you hear it in every nuanced phrase and tonal color. It's worthwhile to pair *Songs from Home* with Brad Mehldau's solo entry *Suite: April 2020*, which offers mainly original music but also "Look for the Silver Lining" and interpretations of Neil Young and Billy Joel.

Rather than *Songs from Home*, **Steve Lehman**'s solo EP *Xenakis and the Valedictorian* might be aptly subtitled "Songs from My Car," which is where the alto saxophonist made it: in his Honda CR-V, where he took an hourlong break from parenting and teaching every day to practice during the first month or so of the pandemic. He recorded these solitary car sessions on his iPhone, and when his mother turned 80 while unable to see her son in person, Mr. Lehman culled some selections into an EP as a gift.



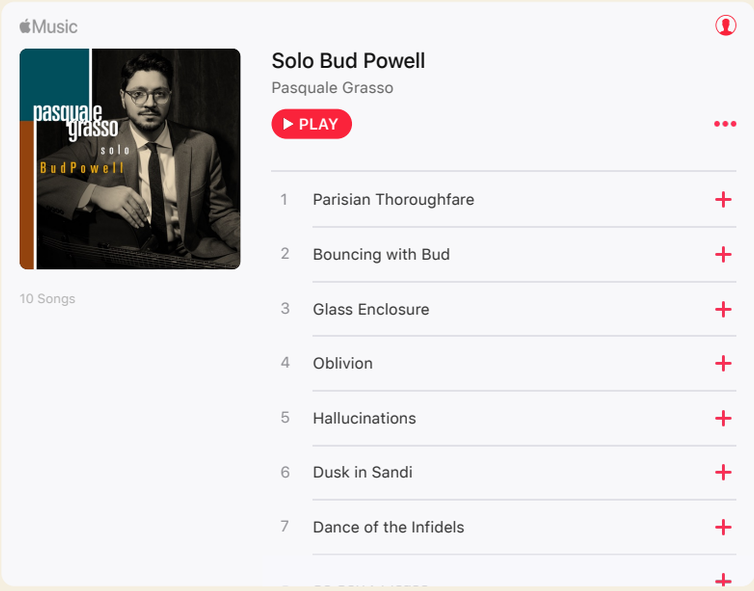
The result, just over seven minutes long, captures something essential about Mr. Lehman's approach to breath, sound generation and extended technique on the horn. The shortest track ("Max," also the most sonically extreme) is 12 seconds; the second longest, "2 Gears | 13 Satellites," is just 1:12 while the finale "CR-V" stretches to 3:27. There's a distinct progression as Mr. Lehman travels from non-pitched sounds and rhythmic keystrokes to faster, more precise boppish lines and feinting pauses. Some tracks, like "Formant vs. Formant," sound almost like vocal warmups. Throughout, Mr. Lehman maintains an urgency and expressive reach that marks his more "finished" ensemble albums.

Bassist **Jorge Roeder**, originally from Lima, Peru, is a vital contributor to bands led by Julian Lage, Ryan Keberle, Sofia Rei, Shai Maestro and many others. On *El Suelo Mío* he brings his artistry to the fore with an audacious solo bass debut (conceived well before the pandemic, released during it). The album pairs interestingly with *The Gleaners*, Larry Grenadier's 2019 solo bass album for ECM, and Mr. Roeder's South American heritage lends a unique dimension, with pieces like "El Plebeyo" by Peru's Felipe Pinglo Alva or "Silencio De Um Minuto" by Brazil's Noel Rosa.



The leadoff title track "El Suelo Mío" translates as "land of mine," but Mr. Roeder has noted it can also mean "ground of mine," as in "foundation." And part of Mr. Roeder's foundation is the music of Chabuca Granda (1920-1983), the Peruvian singer-songwriter and inspiration behind Mr. Roeder's title tune. "Chabuca Limeña" ("Chabuca from Lima") references this national artist as well with a tribute by Manuel Alejandro, transformed by Mr. Roeder into something approaching a duet with himself, bass and melody effortlessly intertwined. "Solo Juntos" is a nod to the huayno Andean folk style, while "Patrona" and "Santa Rosita" take inspiration from Julian Lage. And the jazz tradition is strongly present in "I'll Remember April," "Thing-Thing" (based on Cole Porter) and Ornette Coleman's "Lovely Woman." It's worth noting that the Coleman piece is the only one Mr. Roeder plays with a bow; his classical training is more than evident in his rock-solid pitch and huge projection of sound.

Italian-born, New York-based guitarist **Pasquale Grasso** has developed an uncanny mastery of solo jazz guitar, a challenging discipline exemplified by the likes of Barney Kessel, Bucky Pizzarelli and Joe Pass. But Mr. Grasso has his own way with articulation and harmony, a fully formed language brought about through pick and fingers in ways both technically astounding and supremely swinging and musical. His riveting series of solo albums and EPs was well underway before COVID-19, but 2020 has seen its continuation, and *Solo Bud Powell* ranks as one of the finest installments to date.



Hearing Bud Powell tunes programmed end to end is always something to rejoice at: bebop's greatest piano innovator was also one of its essential composers, and numbers like "Dance of the Infidels," "Bouncing with Bud," "Celia," "Hallucinations" and

"Oblivion" remind one how Powell belongs right up there with Bird and Monk (the subjects of two earlier Grasso solo outings). Mr. Grasso approaches Powell's work with dense rubato block-chord passages and subtle inner voice leading, lightning single-note bebop runs and a relaxed, confident time feel that never fails him. His standards, ballads, and holiday releases are equally worth repeated listens.

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The Jazz Artistry Now article **Solo Album Roundup 2020** was written by **David R. Adler**. Mr. Adler's work has appeared in JazzTimes, The Village Voice, Stereophile, The New York City Jazz Record, The Philadelphia Inquirer, Philadelphia Weekly, Down Beat, Time Out New York, City Arts, Jazziz, The New York Times, The New Republic, Slate, The Forward, The Sondheim Review, Fairmont Magazine (Canada), La Tempestad (Mexico), GEO (Germany), New Music Box, All Music Guide, Global Rhythm, Signal to Noise, Coda, Jewish Currents and more. He is happy to be a contributor to Jazz Artistry Now.

Mr. Adler

David R. Adler, El Suelo Mío, F-35 Jet, Fred Hersch, Jan Solo, Jazz Artistry Now, Jorge Roeder, Palmetto Records, Pasquale Grasso, Pi Recordings, Solo Album Roundup 2020, Solo Albums, Songs from Home, Sony Masterworks, Steve Lehman, T-Town, Xenakis and the Valedictorian

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