

Jazz & Improv

Reviewed by Philip Clark

Gail Brand & Mark Sanders

Instinct & The Body

Regardless CD

Trombonist Gail Brand and drummer Mark Sanders were match-made in Improv heaven. Brand's USP – for want of a better phrase – has always been her ability to probe the history of her instrument while remaining wholly herself. On "tread softly..." the horse-sureness of her linear invention is absolute, as tailgating cadence points march the wrong way and familiar melodic contours are filtered through an enriching spectrum of growling post-Ellingtonian overtones and contrary digressions. There's a powerful moment of repose as Sanders freezes the highpoint of her melodic arc with a pert drum roll that extends the moment, then zooms inside the sound for further exploration. Sanders's kit – with its distinctive shrill woodblocks and barking cymbals – matches the breadth of Brand's extended palette note for note.

Anthony Braxton Quartet

Standards (Brussels) 2006

Amirani 6×CD

Anthony Braxton & Kyle Benders

Toronto (Duets) 2007

Barn Yard 2×CD

As with the two sets of standards Braxton issued on Leo a few years ago, the range of material he surveys here – pieces by Charles Lloyd, George Russell, Thelonious Monk and many others – is admirable, but the manner of their delivery is often puzzlingly strained. "Darn That Dream", Charlie Parker's "Ah Leu Cha" and Wayne Shorter's "Night Dream" are examples of Braxton's car-crash approach to delivering a line; but then he floats through "Fine And Dandy", "Strike Up The Band" and Bill Evans's "Very Early" with a confident swagger. Braxton's accompanying Italian quartet (headed by pianist Alessandro Giachero) are a fine post-bop outfit who paint over Braxton's cracks expertly, but they're no match for the stretched aesthetics that Kevin O'Neil et al bring to the Leo sets. Recorded a year later in Toronto, Braxton performs duo versions of two Ghost Trance scores with Canadian saxophonist Kyle Benders. The purity of the two saxophones is richly satisfying, and this is like eavesdropping on an intimate communion.

Gerald Cleaver/William Parker/

Craig Taborn

Farmers By Nature

AUM Fidelity CD

It takes a little while to twig what's going on here. Craig Taborn's piano chords are insistent but fold back on themselves; drummer Gerald Cleaver places skeletal rhythmic outlines in the middle distance, while William Parker's bass mediates somewhere between the two, often with beautifully cultivated bowed figurations, sometimes with supple extended techniques that morph his bass towards the brittle

tones of Cleaver's kit. The three musicians never allow one instrumental voice to dominate, and any structural moments of arrival have been eliminated. The key word in the title is, in fact, "Farmers", and the group concept – Cleaver's – is that the trio are harvesting a crop of fertile sounds from a single sonic seed. Only in the fourth track, "Not Unlike Number 10", do solo tendencies assert themselves, as Taborn's long solo, full of liberated clusters and sweeping glissandi, releases the profound tension that has already been harnessed.

Clusone 3

Soft Lights And Sweet Music

Hatology CD

Be calmed my friends, that title is ironic. Clusone 3 – Michael Moore (reeds), Ernst Reijseger (cello), Han Bennink (drums) – have been in existence since the early 1980s (the group name comes from the Italian city where they met) and they play a free jazz that's been painted on top of 1920s and 1930s swing. This album explores the Irving Berlin songbook, although Johnny Mercer's charming "Cuckoo In The Clock" crept in by mistake. "There's No Business Like Show Business" is representative of how they function: the original verse-chorus structure of the song is exaggerated ad absurdum to provoke pointed structural disjoints, and Bennink's manic swing violently unhinges the pulse. But Moore seems to know instinctively when the joke might wear thin, and a track like "Marie" twists and shreds Berlin's lines into bizarre contortions. Ends with "White Christmas"!

Garrison Fewell

Variable Density Sound Orchestra

Creative Nation Music CD

Guitarist Garrison Fewell's *Variable Density Sound Orchestra* moves with languid urgency through a 70 minute sequence of sparsely orchestrated compositions where, he says, "the goal is to create balance, not allowing individual soloists, collective instant composing or pre-composed material to dominate for too long". The temptation, in music that develops at this leisurely pace, must be to hang the scale off powerful solo voices, but Fewell divides his space with more cunning. "The Red Pyramid" structures an improvisation as its title suggests, with a single voice accruing extra instrumental lines: the process is then reversed, leaving trumpeter Roy Campbell and bassist John Voight with a fertile melodic vocabulary to explore. The passions of the players are refracted through similarly mathematical prisms throughout.

The Flatlands Collective

Maatjes

Clean Feed CD

From Chicago, Dutch saxophonist Jorrit Dijkstra is joined by James Falzone (clarinet), Jeb Bishop (trombone), Fred Lonberg-Holm (cello), Jason Roebke

(bass) and Frank Rosaly (drums) in an album elevated beyond the norm because of Dijkstra's oblique conceptual thinking. The opening track, "A Mission Rocker", works disorienting slides and glissandi into an innocent sounding fusion tune, while the inch by inch evolution of "Partially Overdone" is governed by who blinks first as the musicians lock into an harmonic overtone series. Other pieces, including two versions of the title track, are more opened.

Dave Fox Group

Home Again

Konnex CD

The Dave Fox Group play rockist free Improv that is aggressive and assertive, but never naively macho. The sound of Fox's own keyboards ranges from the post-1970s Milesian atmosphere evoked by his Fender Rhodes to the visceral noise attack of his acoustic playing. On guitar, Bruce Eisenbeil adds sculpturally abstracted funk licks, or he fills the space with a constellation of super-high register whistles and rolling fragmented trills that puts vast distance between him and the earthbound beats of drummer Jon Marc Ryan Dale and bassist Pat Lawrence. Hardcore, fast moving events are the group signature, but some pieces construct bare bones structures out of minimal starting points.

H-Alpha

Red Sphere

Skiri CD

The most prominent voice in H-Alpha is saxophonist Briggan Krauss – best known for his role in Sex Mob – but now reasserting his own distinct musical obsessions. Krauss opens the album in the gravelly, strained register of his alto, outlining spiky rhythmic impetus that is a red rag to Jim Black's bullish drums; laptopper Ikue Mori sits between, blending the energies. The album is built from simple but effective light and shade: extended labyrinths hit against brief interruptive aphorisms, while tracks like "Alpha Centauri" explore softer soundscapes. Funk rhythms underlie the sort of rhythmically free, texturally yelping saxophone playing that normally has nothing to do with funk.

John O'Gallagher Trio

Dirty Hands

Clean Feed CD

This CD is representative of a drift within the Clean Feed catalogue towards nothing more than talented musicians doing their thing – you wonder quite who's going to be fired with enthusiasm by such a generic product. New York saxophonist John O'Gallagher begins with the upbeat, Ornette-flavoured "Bed Bugs", an opener that's all swank and flash but fails to lead him anywhere. Already by the second track, bassist Masa Kamaguchi's fussy bass introduction feels overly academic and just a bit 'correct'.



Iron lungs: Alan Wilkinson

Office-R(6)

Recording The Grain

+3dB CD

Following their 2006 taster CD *Mundane Occurrences And Presentations*, Amsterdam based Improv collective Office-R(6) return with what's described as a "full-bodied and mature presentation" of their concepts. The improvisations evolve from structures developed by bassist Koen Nutters. Robert van Hueman and Jeff Carey's digital sampling orbits and converges with the acoustic tones of Dirk Bruinsman's reeds, Morton J Olsen's delicate percussion and Nutters's own bass playing, and the most affecting moments occur when fragments of pureed saxophone and bass appear from behind the stop-start wall of electronics. Nutters demolishes the same old, same old structural tennis game of acoustic instruments serving up ideas which laptopists rally back over the net, modified but rarely whacked interestingly offside.

Alan Wilkinson/John Edwards/

Steve Noble

Live At Cafe Oto

Bo' Weavil CD

Few saxophonists have the balls – or the industrial strength lung capacity – to deal in the extremes of physicality that Alan Wilkinson pumps through his alto and baritone saxophones. This live session, recorded in East London in July last year, is a fine example of his art. Opening with audience ambience, the punters are soon stunned into shocked silence by Wilkinson's opening scream, which is the most bloodcurdling and beautifully ugly noise I've ever heard emanate from a saxophone. But it's easy to make a fetish of Wilkinson's manner of delivery and overlook the subtleties that have formed his language. Architecturally, as the opening 30 minute track demonstrates, he pursues each sound wave up or down to its logical endpoint, and he has a focused ear for building intervallic relationships. The encore grooves over Steve Noble's funk rhythms and John Edwards's R&B basslines: Wilkinson's joy finds its outlet vocally and through a tart, driving saxophone solo. □