

Soundcheck A–Z

New CDs, vinyl, downloads, streams etc

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Akropolis Reed Quintet

Ghost Light

New Focus CD/DL

Playing together intensively for more than a decade, Akropolis Reed Quintet have evolved a collective voice that appears to be organically integrated. If their technical ability, its scope, precision and finesse, enables these five Detroit based musicians to gel as a unit, total trust has to be a vital factor too. There's nothing tentative in their approach, and that extends to their programming of multifariously challenging and imaginative new works.

Ghost Light opens with Stacy Garrop's *Rites For The Afterlife*. Kari Landry's clarinet, Andrew Koepp's bass clarinet, Ryan Reynolds's bassoon, Matt Landry's saxophone and Tim Gocklin's oboe seem to turn around a single axle, like spokes from a shared hub, as their agile instrumental voices trace the journey of a soul, as related in the Egyptian Book of the Dead. Michael Gilbertson's *Kinds Of Light* translates gradations of luminescence into sound, making use of the quintet's remarkable capacity to draw out fine shadings of timbre without compromising the phenomenal coordination of their performance.

Contrasts within *Firing Squad*, written by New York based Iranian composer Niloufar Nourbakhsh, suggest the disconnect between an execution squad, with its regimented flourishes, and the tormented delirium of their victim. The quintet brilliantly communicate that tragic tension. Theo Chandler's *Seed To Snag*, enacting the life cycle of a tree, seems consciously to stem directly from the group's organic character.

Finally, Jeff Scott's *Homage To Paradise Valley*, interleaved with poetry written and read by Marsha Music, reflects upon facets of Black American experience. Sparking together, Scott and Music bring another level of resonance to Akropolis Reed Quintet's repertoire. Ensembles achieving this standard of professional excellence can easily start to sound slick and self-satisfied. But *Ghost Light* finds this exceptional outfit audibly driven by real excitement and a sense of adventure.

Julian Cowley

Lina Allemano Four

Vegetables

Lumo CD/DL

BLOOP

Proof

Lumo CD/DL

BLOOP pair Toronto based trumpeter Lina Allemano with electronic musician Mike Smith. On "Enchantments", the first of their electroacoustic improvisations, Smith's interventions are relatively subtle. It begins with the sound of Allemano's

jingling percussion being sucked into a backwards delay loop, before she introduces a two-note motif on trumpet. Smith doubles the motif with its harmonised echo, then tweaks it up two octaves. As the elegant contours of Allemano's melody emerge, Smith shifts to time based modulation, adding delay trails and crunchy digital textures. "Decanted" is a witty trompe l'oreille, as Allemano rolls a ball around an amplified surface and then mimics that sound on trumpet through saliva, breath and piston valve effects.

On "Recanting" Smith closely follows Allemano's burbling and chattering trumpet, his processed signal enhancing the non-human tone of her mute techniques. He then moves to free improvisation, taking a slice of the original and drawing swooping new lines with it. Their process of transformation reaches its apex on "The Nestlings (Metamorphosis)" where Allemano's whistles and hums move around Smith's otherworldly spatialisation. A pitch-shifted chorus of purring and mewling cats bounce around the stereo field, before Allemano's stately trumpet finally restores order. *Proof* offers a deft balance of the the playful and the reflective, its eccentricities enhancing the beauty.

Allemano is a distinctive trumpeter, her softly grained tone streaked with silver. She's an impressive bandleader too. *Vegetables* is the sixth album from her chamber jazz quartet. From the off, it's clear we're listening to a seasoned ensemble. They're super tight, yet they make intricate parts sound organic, even casual at times. Check the slurred chatter between Allemano and alto saxophonist Brodie West on "Beans" – two Beckettian characters channelling Ornette Coleman and Don Cherry. The flavoursome "Onions" has the horns alternating staccato and see-saw motifs around a groaning arco bass, while "Champignons" has a stately elegiac theme blooming out of Andrew Downing's warm, tactile bass mycelium. "Brussel Sprouts, Maybe Cabbage" is suitably sulphurous while "Leafy Greens" moves from abstract tonal drift to slinky funk, before breaking down into dislocated free improv.

Yuko Araki

End Of Trilogy

Room40 CD/DL

Yuko Araki is one of a number of young female Japanese artists working on the fringes of noise, experimental electronics and post-industrial techno. She's fierce as fuck. Her latest album *End Of Trilogy* opens with "Code Of Sanctuary", a fiery ball of

arpeggiating synths, fast-paced drums and feral screams. From there, tracks like "Exhalation", "Inconstant Tangents" and "Tricentennial" work through a spectrum of frequencies peppered with choppy rhythms, transforming oscillators and modified vocals.

Reminiscent of early Suzanne Ciani, "A Ripple From Observatory" plays with step sequencing and arping synths while "Moonstroke In The Mountain" tugs at melodies that constantly teeter on the cusp on feedback. There are further crushing electronics in "Barnacle Twins" as Araki builds intensity through finely assembled layers that slowly detune into untravelling motifs. "Dreaming Insects" builds momentum through a barrage of white noise, scuttling beats and screeching oscillators. "Optical Landfall" is a gnarly gemstone that spits out kickdrums into a shredded blanket, finally simmering down to glitchy synths in free rhythm. Smatterings of metal (Araki was a teenage metalhead) seep through "Positron In Bloom" while "Blood And Castle" sounds like a melting Operation gameboard played through a Fisher Price tape recorder.

The album's final assault on the senses is "Dying Of The Night", a wall of wailing synths entrenched in a floor of drones. Comparable to the work of Evicshen and Pharmakom, *End Of Trilogy* showcases Araki's playfulness, skills and energy to brilliantly brutal effect.

Mariam Rezaei

Armand Hammer & The Alchemist *Haram*

Backwoodz Studioz CD/DL/LP/MC

This energised, often startling pairing of Armand Hammer aka Billy Woods and Elucid with Los Angeles producer The Alchemist offers a palimpsest of New York and its hip-hop scene, past and present. The title of "Sir Benni Miles" refers to a NYC streetwear label while "Robert Moses" was the "master builder" whose legacy as developer of massive expressway and public housing projects in the city remains as polarising as Haussmann's destruction of old Paris.

Haram's decapitated pigs' heads sleeve indicates a generalised thirst for justice perhaps; see these incredible bars from "Indian Summer" where Woods declares, "I swore vengeance in the seventh grade/ Not on one man, the whole human race/I'm almost done, God be praised/I'm almost done, every debt gets paid". In itself, a classic East Coast street mindset. "Roaches Don't Fly" couldn't be more New York if it tried, as Elucid enunciates the binary reality of major centres. It also includes a reference to John 4:48 and our current predicament with "Sick and shut in/ Signs and wonders".

Not everything fits into the notion that New York is the album's principal theme and inspiration, however. One highlight, "Peppertree", amps the musical hysteria with a wash of intersecting sonic planes. Unlike most hip-hop instrumentals where core samples are repeated and there is a sense of development, here the beat is a mesh of static and noise. "When they march me down the road, so/ When them ride me down the road, tho", begins Woods from the perspective of a man who has recently died. "Mahogany with the gold trim silent/ Except for children crying they never even knew him". The rhymes evoke the MC's maternal Jamaican bloodline ("Chicken rice peas/sticky cake").

An album as complex as this encourages listeners to reflect on themselves. Asked in 2020 to reflect on his plague year, Woods likened it to a "black hole... a not normal, a new version of normal" then shared how one evening, he sat "way off from everyone" and ordered a cocktail at a bar. This image of the reclusive MC sipping a Mai Tai – paper umbrella, small glass dish of peanuts – at a Crown Heights dive in the middle of a global pandemic sums up something of *Haram*'s trajectory.

Madeleine Byrne

Arthur King

Changing Landscapes (Isle Of Eigg)

AKP DL

Invited to participate in the Howlin' Fling festival, held on the Scottish Isle of Eigg and organised by Lost Map Records, Granddaddy's Jason Lytle brought along Peter Walker and Aaron Espinoza from Los Angeles collective Arthur King to join him as the festival's artists-in-residence, gathering audiovisual matter to create an album, short film and installation.

The Twitter account @RuralModernism regularly posts images of pylons striding brutally over country gardens, villagers playing cricket in the shadow of power stations and water towers peeping out over the tree line. These images force a reconsideration of the accepted stereotypes relating to life in bucolic locations. *Changing Landscapes (Isle Of Eigg)*, which was improvised live at the festival, feels like its sonic equivalent. "An Sgurr" is reminiscent of Mica Levi's *Under The Skin* soundtrack, not especially in terms of sound, but a similar prowling malevolence that maintains a low but constant profile. It becomes clear, as disconnected voices are arranged in overlapping squabble, that this is an exploration of the duality of parochial identity. Local voices decant often conflicting views about island life, like eavesdropping on gossip as it's uttered through an analogue telephone exchange.

This sense of being privy to private thoughts – the babble that rolls back and