

## RECORDINGS

**Susan Alcorn. *Soledad*.** Relative Pitch Records, RPR1032.



Astor Piazzolla's eccentricity as a composer is overshadowed by his reputation as one of the foremost exponents of tango music.

The ostensible genre designation tends to mask his poignant and peculiar mixture of forlorn sentimentalism, tense dissonances, and covert use of noise. Susan Alcorn, herself an expert of oblique lyricism, understands this very well. Her translation of Piazzolla's compositions into the warm drawl of her pedal steel guitar on four of the five cuts on her CD *Soledad* brings this into sharp focus, while insinuating her own imagination into the equation.

The album opens with a drowsy yet assiduous take on the title piece—slowed to the point of the mere suggestion of a dance—and continues to unfold in a similarly dreamlike, nocturnal manner. In more typical readings of Piazzolla's work—even the slow stuff—its chromatic snakings tend to be imbued with a nervous agility, but here one is really able to appreciate each distinct melodic turn and the way it sits against the varying degrees of harmonic opacity.

With each successive track, Alcorn's enviable command of her unwieldy instrument is more and more revealed, but one never gets the impression of excessive displays of virtuosity or that she's fighting the instrument's innate resonant legato. Rather, the increasing number of surprising colours that emerge—gong-like chordal swells, brittle music-box-like figures, nimble contrapuntal dances and swooping glissandi—are blended progressively into a single cohesive palette of sound.

Her one lone original composition on the album, "Suite for Ah!" (the only track that's not a solo), fits in remarkably well, with opening nods vaguely in Piazzolla's direction. Bassist Michael Formanek frequently anchors the low end, freeing Alcorn to produce wild ripples of texture and fluid high sweeps, while he also

contributes his gales of bowed tremolo and cleanly plucked melodies.

*Soledad* serves equally well as both an introverted homage to Piazzolla and as an introduction to Alcorn's own euphoniously exploratory artistry.

—Nick Storring

**Lindsay Cooper. *Rarities, Volumes 1 & 2*.**

ReR Megacorp, LC2/3.



British reed player and composer Lindsay Cooper was an extraordinary musician. A classically trained bassoonist, active in various fields, she was

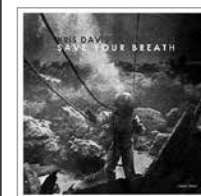
primarily known for her work with the groundbreaking improv-rock band Henry Cow. She also played in some of its successors, such as Art Bears and News from Babel, and recorded and toured with The Pedestrians, one of the bands built around David Thomas. In addition, she initiated the Feminist Improvisers Group and wrote several film scores. From the early '90s onwards she had to gradually scale back her activities as a result of multiple sclerosis, with which she had been diagnosed more than a decade before. The illness forced her to retreat within herself up until her death in 2013. This is all the more bitter in light of the music she made, as evidenced on the commemorative CD set *Rarities, Volumes 1 & 2*. It is a compilation culled from various sources, mostly limited editions of vinyl albums and cassettes.

In Cooper's compositions it is not only the bassoon that takes the limelight. Just as often, she gives soprano and soprano sax twin leading roles. They make the music sound sprightly, joyous, exuberant. This is further enhanced by the jumpy, bouncy rhythms that drive the melodies forward. The buoyant mood is even there when the contents of songs are grim or despondent, as in the vignettes that make up *Pictures from the Great Exhibition*. That piece was originally released as a subscription-only addition to the LP *Rags*, a score for a film that contrasts the poverty and the miserable life of women in nineteenth-century London sweatshops with the abundance and opulence of

the 1851 Great Exhibition. In a nutshell, this represents her main interests: an antiestablishment stance, the empowerment of women, and an irrepressible urge to play, to be heard, to jump around—with dedication and focus, and with an apparent zest for life. This is evident in a recording of her playing the keys, innards, and housing of a piano in a concert at Roulette. It is concentrated improvisation but it's also great fun, as if her fingers are playing tag on and in the instrument. This album is a fitting memorial to a creative life that was cruelly cut short by a horrific disease.

—René van Peer

**Kris Davis. *Save Your Breath*.** Clean Feed, CF 322 CD.



Consolidating her considerable musical gifts, Canadian-born, New York-based Kris Davis organized a uniquely constituted octet here to premiere or propagate her compositions. Confirming her range, the eight tunes are breezy and animated in spots, while looped around a dense, metal-like core. With an ensemble consisting of Ben Goldberg, Oscar Noriega, Joachim Badenhorst, and Andrew Bishop, all playing different-sized clarinets, with drummer Jim Black and guitarist Nate Radley, plus Gary Versace on organ and Davis on piano, the engendered textures frequently imply many associations, often during the same tune.

"Whirly Swirly," for instance, despite its fanciful title, is actually a multipart suite. After the rock-influenced lead guitar faces off against metre-less free-jazz drumming, a piano interlude introduces raucous multi-reed vibrations that sweep across juddering organ smears. Before the piece climaxes with a duel between pounding piano and percussion, a stark clarinet line stands out from other reed textures, harmonized in such a way that baroque motifs are evoked. Arranging only for reeds and rhythm doesn't limit Davis either. A track such as "Jumping Over Your Shadow," for example, shows how limpid bass-clarinet tones mixed with calliope-like keyboard juddering can put

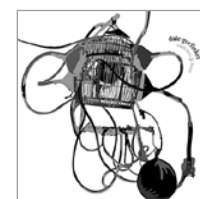
textural flesh and bones on what starts off as a narrow display of solo-clarinet tongue-slapping. On the other hand, "The Ghost of Your Previous Fuckup" is introduced with a sequence of explosive polyphony, until the swivelling theme is revealed. From then on until the concluding organ-piano meld, thematic variations arrive via piano-key clipping, low-pitched alto-clarinet echoes and, finally, clarinet warbles that create a relaxed line, even as the thick bass-clarinet-and-drum groove keeps it grounded.

Davis' music reflects and conflates both composed and improvised strategies, so demand for more large-scale compositions by her will likely increase—which she maybe senses, the title of one of this CD's compositions declaring, "Always Leave Them [Wanting More]."

—Ken Waxman

**Dale Gorfinkel. *Switches & Hose*.**

Split Records, splitrec 25.



Bringing out the innate musicality of already existing objects or locations, Australian musician Dale Gorfinkel invents novel instruments or judiciously introduces standard ones into unexpected surroundings. This brief CD offers four specific examples of his particular skills. A Melbourne-based multi-instrumentalist, Gorfinkel is sophisticated in his use of the microtonal properties of trumpet and especially of vibraphone.

"I'm Walking in a Room, with Two Vibraphones," for instance, not only riffs on Alvin Lucier's best-known composition, but also captures the shimmering colours that result from Gorfinkel's blending of the vibes' tonal rubs and strokes. These precise crossovers and intersections are notable, since the wobbly tones are never precisely parallel. "Gong Cage" exhibits superior instrumental skill, as he uses mallets to quiver and wobble a modified Indonesian kinetic sound sculpture in a birdcage, so that a vague Oriental lilt is added to gentle vibraphone-like insinuations. "Enoggera" shows how bubbling grace notes and moist burrs from a modified trumpet can integrate almost perfectly within genuine aviary song-

making, without the horn losing its brass identity. Finally, "Switches & Hose," the lengthiest track, converts a foot pump, balloons, garden irrigation, taps, plastic containers, and reeds into an Outback orchestra. The alternately soothing and discordant narrative spawns genuine musical patterns without ever negating the implements' humble origins.

Gorfinkel's fascinating sound art leaves the listener wondering—but not being able to determine—which parts of the satisfying creation result from his sound navigation and how much of it is naturally generated.

—Ken Waxman

**Anne-F Jacques. *Sable ou Sel*.**

atrito-afeito 004.



Anne-F Jacques is a Montreal sound artist who plays acoustic noise-music on invented instruments. Mechanical loops are created when various objects are attached to spinning motors amplified by contact mikes, assemblies that Jacques categorizes as her "rotating devices." Unlike the digital world of perfect repetition, her improvisations are brought to life by erratic variations arising from the malleable mechanics of her contraptions.

*Sable ou Sel* contains two tracks labelled simply "A" and "B," each close to eleven minutes in duration. An ever-present pinkish noise background reminds one of listening to a seashell—if one could vary the intensity, which at times threatens to rupture speaker cones with low frequency bursts. Against that backdrop, Jacques adds layers of static sparks and engine grinds, along with more delicate irregular ticks. While this is unmistakably coarse music, it is less harsh compared to the more extreme forms of the industrial genre. Rather than the postapocalyptic cityscape of Eraserhead, we hear the nuts and bolts of small parts being assembled and disassembled, stamped, stapled, and falling to the floor. The overall impression is of a day in a disorganized tack factory located in a highly reverberant silo.

While both tracks share similar textures,

"B" distinguishes itself through a stiff monochromatic dance-beat towards, the end before fading out with muted percussive knocks and what sounds like a forest of insects. Jacques' music has a strong physical presence, yet remains playful—a tricky balance pulled off here with finesse.

—Lawrence Joseph

**Kronos Quartet. *Tundra Songs*.** Centrediscs, CMCCD 21015.



Hearing the first two tracks of *Tundra Songs* is something of an eye-opener. The musicians of the celebrated Kronos Quartet, sawing away at their instru-

ments, produce driving, grinding sounds that are very similar to the throatsinging games of the northern Canadian Inuit people. After the initial surprise, you realize that the techniques have high energy and taut strings in common. The guttural grunts often emulate sounds from the Inuit's natural environment. These elements bind this album together, thematically and sonically. In Derek Charke's compositions *Cercle du Nord III* and *Tundra Songs*, the two main pieces on the CD, soundscapes from the Canadian north and throat singing are returning points of reference. *Tundra Songs* itself, taking up more than half of the album, is an especially gripping piece. It follows the annual cycle of seasons, revolving around a gruesome summer tale about the creation of animals out of the fingers a man hacks from the hands of his daughter. Vocalist Tanya Tagaq improvises with the quartet, providing a raw, breathless edge to their virtuosic melodies. Most of this music is riveting, as if evoking the rush of a sleigh run over ice fields. Out of respect for the North, however, Charke somehow couldn't limit himself in the materials he wanted to use. So, in a sense, the entire North is crammed into one half hour. Everything, except perhaps for stretches of white emptiness. Despite all the arctic sounds, the piece actually comes across as a rather tense urban composition.

—René van Peer