

# ALBUMREVIEWS//

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## NEW RELEASES//A-Z



Susan Alcorn

### Susan Alcorn

Soledad

Relative Pitch Records RPR 1032

★★★★

Susan Alcorn (pedal steel guitar) and Michael Formanek (b). Rec. October 2012-April 2013

It's wholly fitting that this questing US pedal steel guitarist has chosen to interpret the *nuevo tango* of Astor Piazzolla on her latest long-player. The late Argentinean composer presided over a revolution in traditional music by emphasising elements of improvisation, dissonance and counterpoint, while Alcorn seeks the total liberation of her instrument, away from the stifling confines of country accompaniment, by incorporating free jazz and classical composition into her extraordinarily singular designs. The deeply affecting takes on *Soledad* are stocked full of such images, from Ornette's 'Lonely Woman' ('Adiós Nonino') to Wagner ('Invierno Porteño') and Vitali ('Tristezas De Un Doble A'). These allusions, disclosed during the careful processes of translation, weave between the sonorous glides and soft percussive phrasing coursing through these five exquisite pieces like beads of mercury passing down a thread of spider's silk. *Soledad* ranks right there alongside Alcorn's very best work, echoing the ecclesiastical tenderness and far more secular sorrows of previous low-key gems such as *Uma* and the appositely titled and quite wonderful *And I Await The Resurrection Of The Pedal Steel Guitar*.


Spencer Grady

### Beats & Pieces

Big Band All In

Efpi ★★★★★

Ben Cottrell (comp, arr, s) with big band featuring Finlay Panter (d), Nick Walters (t), Sam Healey (s), Graham South (fgh) and others. Rec. Jan 2014

Since their highly acclaimed 2011 debut *Big Ideas*, Ben Cottrell's Mancunian big band, Beats & Pieces, have been breaking down barriers between jazz musicians and audiences both in the UK and internationally with their exuberantly direct approach to live performance. There is a sign of a return, if not to the big band's original role to make people get up and dance, then to the idea that contemporary jazz for big band can still generate the kind of direct impact more associated with rock and pop music, but without undermining its essential craft and sophistication. On their second album *All In* Cottrell has as successfully as it's possible recaptured the collective high spirits and infectious energy of the band live in the studio. At the core is a driving rock band set-up of guitar, keys and rhythm section. There are shades of Colin Towns and Gil Evans' 1970s' work in the grungy lower brass riffs and screeching noir-jazz horns with solos that have an instinctive edge-of-the-seat feel about them from a line-up that's been practically unchanged for the best part of a decade. All tracks are Cottrell's originals aside from a wonderfully crafted, atmospheric arrangement of David Bowie's 1980s' hit 'Let's Dance' that never tries to sound clever but succeeds nonetheless.  Highly recommended. Selwyn Harris

### Big Screen Take One

Linn (AKD 504) ★★★

Matt Skelton (d, perc), Dave Newton (p) and Tom Farmer (b) Rec. Nov 2013/Mar 14

It's funny how an unapologetically glossy traditional piano trio take on popular TV and film themes can start to sound quite refreshing after experiencing a lot of what's known as contemporary piano trio jazz. But that's the case with *Big Screen's Take One*, a new album by a trio of three high-calibre musicians, very well versed in straight ahead swing. They are the veteran Scottish pianist Dave Newton, and younger rhythm section of the Empirical bassist Tom Farmer and drummer-leader Matt Skelton, whose heart is closest to the project being the drummer in the film score specialist arranger John Wilson Orchestra. The trio swing their way economically through a set of songs mostly from Broadway movie musicals, bar a version of 'Chariots of Fire' where the emphasis is on a subtle re-harmonisation of the well-known melody, something that would test the patience of a band like The Bad Plus. A pair of ballads Randy Newman's 'When She Loved Me' and Lionel Bart's 'Wouldn't It Be Lovely' round off the album, shot through with a subtle dose of Americana but no less elegant for it. A perfect fit for Jazz FM's *Dinner Jazz* slot you could say. But this is a classy showing and Linn's high quality production values back it all the way. Selwyn Harris

### Binker And Moses

Dem Ones

Gearbox GB1530 vinyl/download ★★★

Binker Golding (ts) and Moses Boyd (d). Rec. November 2014

Noted for their work with the likes of Zara McFarlane, Peter Edwards and Denys Baptiste among others, Golding and Boyd have more than served notice of their rapidly developing talent over the last few years. But this debut nonetheless springs the proverbial surprise above all for the premise itself. The drums-horn duet is a relatively uncommon and unforgiving format that requires both rich content and chemistry between the players for any hope of artistic success. In such a sparse, open setting there

is no place to hide, so to speak, and the question of how to engage the listener without the additional colour of chords and counterpoint is paramount. Saxophonist Golding and drummer Boyd broach the subject in many ways, sometimes constructing a piece as two lengthy entwined solos, in which the horn pummels and pirouettes as much as the drums do, and the percussive quality of each instrument reinforces that of the other ('No Long Tings'), sometimes giving the kit more of a conga-darbuka feel ('Black Avenue Maria') that enhances the eastern character of the reed. And sometimes creating a kind of unplugged dub ambience ('The Creeper') that suggests an acoustic rather than electric trance. In any case each particular facet of the black diasporan musical culture into which the duo taps is re-channelled with sufficient maturity and imagination to make the point that the players don't see their harmonically denuded context solely as an outlet by which to further the great Trane-Rashied Ali legacy. If there are other pertinent references then they would be Jackie McLean-Michael Carvin's *Antiquity* or Kahil El'Zabar-David Murray's *Golden Sea*. Although Golding and Boyd do not use their voices there is occasionally a singing, African-Caribbean folk vibe in the session that is well served by the spontaneous, 'first take' feel of the recording. Kevin Le Gendre

### Samuel Blaser Quartet

Spring Rain

Whirlwind WR4670 ★★★

Samuel Blaser (tb), Russ Lossing (p, kys), Drew Gress (b) and Gerald Cleaver (d). Rec. 3-4 January 2014 and 19 December 2014

Stand back and this might seem like an art music recital that would not be out of place in the Wigmore Hall or more likely, the Vortex. Blaser has already spoken of the influence of avant-garde composers such as Stravinsky and Morton Feldman and his note suggests that this music is largely constructed as a tribute to clarinetist and composer Jimmy Giuffre, another idiosyncratic musical figure. In fact, three of these pieces are Giuffre's with two more by Carla Bley; the remainder by Blaser with some participation by Lossing.