

Radical Empathy
Thollem/Michael Wimberly/Nels Cline
(Relative Pitch)
by John Pietaro

Pianist Thollem McDonas has managed to be fabulously prolific and simultaneously fly below the radar. Perhaps that's because he's so hard to pin down. Each new project seems to offer a different perspective from the last. Sure enough, *Radical Empathy*, a co-operative effort with guitarist Nels Cline and drummer Michael Wimberly, is like nothing he's done before. In part that's down to Thollem's (as he styles himself on the sleeve) novel embrace of electronic effects to modify his customary piano sound.

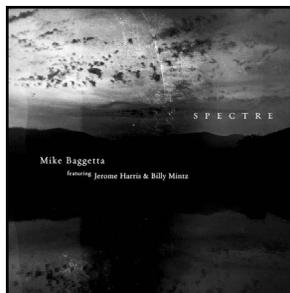
All 13 tracks in the 47-minute program are jointly credited and seem improvised. If coming from a jazz background then the music brings to mind some diverse references. Several numbers, including the swirling title cut, "Thinkers Mix" with its searing guitar and pulsing "Thought Pools", evoke the rocky energy of Tony Williams' Lifetime, with Thollem channeling Larry Young. Elsewhere, particularly on "Howled Ground", Thollem creates the same sort of homespun electronics feel as Sun Ra in his more out-there moments.

At times it can be tricky to differentiate between

Cline and Thollem, as the former's guitar bears an uncanny resemblance to the treated keyboards of the latter, especially on "Rain Drips To". That sense is exacerbated when Thollem echoes Cline's tremolos and phrasing on the ambient "Rogue Thinkers".

There's more exchange of repeated figures on "The Middle", where they hew closer to the conventional instrumental profiles in a fast-paced conversation fueled by clattering drums, before a guitar shimmy introduces a lyrical coda as Wimberly kicks back. When Wimberly doesn't play a prominent part, spacey exploration ensues, as on "Pores", but where he does partake his explosive outbursts provide a firm link to the tradition. Variety comes in "Pools Up", which sounds as if Lifetime has detoured down a textural improv byway while the concluding "Of Being" starts exotically with jangling guitar and cymbals and finishes with Thollem picking out a minor key melody.

For more information, visit relativepitchrecords.com. *Cline is at Drom May 11th as part of Alternative Guitar Summit, Le Poisson Rouge May 12th with Jenny Scheinman and The Stone May 29th with Adam Rudolph. See Calendar.*



Spectre
Mike Baggetta (Fresh Sound-New Talent)
by Robert Iannapolo

Guitarist Mike Baggetta has been recording for the past ten years, amassing a discography of distinction. His first release (in 2005) was with TIN/BAG, a duo with trumpeter Kris Tiner, and the pair have released four albums since then. He formed a quartet with saxophonist Jason Rigby, bassist Eivind Opsvik and drummer George Schuller, releasing four albums since 2009. Put in a solo recording and you have a substantial discography of a guitarist with a personal style.

Baggetta is not an in-your-face player, preferring to dole out thoughtful but dynamic phrases with an emphasis on melody and texture. While he uses effects to enhance his sound they are never the dominant force. He frequently distorts his lines through unique phrasing and subtle bending and scraping of strings. And he always seems to be seeking new avenues to explore.

Toward that end, he has recorded *Spectre* with a new trio of bassist Jerome Harris and drummer Billy Mintz. They're well-chosen partners and the group really works as a unit. Baggetta is the main voice but Harris and Mintz are always in there helping to shape the material, occasionally merging into one. The general tone is one of pensive calm, yet there's a questing search inherent in this music that takes it beyond mere subtlety.

"Passage", the longest track here at 10+ minutes, feels like a distant cousin to "In A Silent Way" with an electronic underlay functioning like the electric pianos on that legendary Miles Davis track. "Leavin' On Your Mind" (Patsy Cline's last recording before her 1963 death in a plane crash) gets a gorgeous, free-flowing reading, which unfolds in kaleidoscopic fashion. And just so the listener doesn't get too complacent, Mintz' "Nasty" is delivered with snarling fuzz-drenched guitar. This trio is a new vein for Baggetta and *Spectre* shows it's one that clearly deserves to be mined further.

For more information, visit freshsoundrecords.com. This project is at Drom May 11th as part of Alternative Guitar Summit. See Calendar.

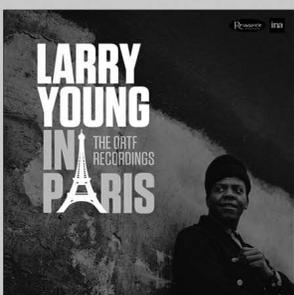
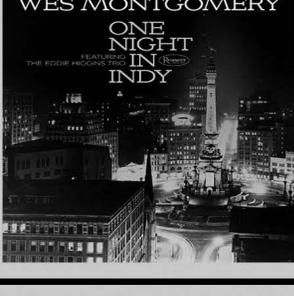
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