

New Sounds from NOLA

A new crop of jazz musicians is on the rise in New Orleans, all of whom possess a distinctly "Crescent City" skill set. They are talented, first and foremost, and can play a variety of music. But most importantly, these musicians don't draw a line between jazz's intellectual aspect and its ability to entertain. They play from the head and the heart, which makes for music that is both deeply intelligent and endlessly amusing.

Sasha Masakowski is known for singing and arranging everything from experimental art-rock to Brazilian samba jazz. On her *Old Green River* (Sasha Masakowski Music; 61:00 ★★½), she and her band, the Sidewalk Strutters, take on a swinging set of uppers. This recording was made in two days after Mardi Gras in February 2015, and has the happily hungover feel to match, especially in the leisurely pace of "I'm Getting Sentimental Over You" and "Until The Real Thing Comes Along." Masakowski takes obscure and well-known tunes and glides over the melodies with a polished tone. The band lays back just enough to stay out of her way, but steps up when needed, such as during the opening cadenza of "Russian Lullaby" and sinister bass and wa-wa mute trombone of "Joshua Fit The Battle Of Jericho."

Ordering info: sashamasakowski.com

Organist **Charlie Dennard's** new release, *5 O'Clock Charlie* (Self Release; 58:09 ★★½), proves that his years touring with the circus of Cirque du Soleil have not hindered his ability to lay down a groove. This organ trio record combines effortless rhythms with solos that have smooth contours and self-perpetuating motion. The biggest surprise is guitarist Todd Duke, who is known for his traditional New Orleans chops but here comes up with a hard sound and clear, sharp attack. He cuts a deep hole in the pocket that Dennard and drummers Geoff Clapp and Doug Belote have stitched together. The band digs in and gives what could be an ordinary jam session an edge. These are the kind of grooves you don't hear to often on organ trio records.

Ordering info: charliedennard.com

Pianist **Tom McDermott** is one of New Orleans' most varied and creative pianists. His sets on the edge of the Faubourg Marigny with vocalist/saxophonist/accordionist **Aurora Nealand** have thrilled people for years, and their album *City Of Timbres* (OPM Music; 48:00 ★★★★★) exhibits their sensuous musical connection. "Moanin' Low" and "Make Me A Pallet On The Floor" have a flirtatious and seductive vibe that continues with a French take on "La Nouvelle Orleans" and the moody McDermott original "Opulence." Both McDermott and Nealand bring the classical strains



and Caribbean syncopations of New Orleans to their music, and those elements contrast in a fine but no less sensuous fashion on this great album.

Ordering info: mcdermottmusic.com

Brad Walker, saxophonist for funk-rockers Johnny Sketch and the Dirty Notes, brings a soulful/avant-garde approach to his latest disc, *Quintet* (Self Release; 68:13 ★★★★★). The music pairs reedy, soaring lines against some rougher and more naturalistic textures, with subtle electric processing. There is a pop element here that mixes well with solid jazz base. Walker's songs are not simple sketches that lead to jams or overly virtuoso flights of fancy; they tell stories, and his band is more than adept at telling them, especially Brian Seeger on guitar and James Singleton on bass.

Ordering info: bradwalker.me

Trombonist Mark McGrain is the leader of the modern-jazz-with-a-tinge-of-funk band *Plunge*, whose latest album, *IN For The OUT (Immersion 15-01; 69:29 ★★★★★)*, sustains a groove from beginning to end. McGrain's trick is to feature two low-register players—Kirk Joseph on sousaphone and Singleton (again) on bass—to keep the music moving. Listen to the unison lines on "Schoolie's Day" and the group solos on "As Angels Roar" to get a feel. McGrain's playing, when coupled with the late reedman Tim Green and tenor player Tom Fitzpatrick, can venture outside the changes, but never distastefully so. His solos are poignant and well thought out, and the band is well suited at both abstract compositions and the earthier, funkier ones. **DB**

Ordering info: immersionrecords.com



London, Meader, Pramuk & Ross *The Royal Bopsters Project*

MOTÉMA 182

★★★★½

Does the world really need another jazz vocal quartet? After listening to this effervescent album, in which some of the hippest vocalists in jazz history join a younger generation of scat-singers to reimagine the tight harmonies and witty vocalese wordplay epitomized by Lambert, Hendricks & Ross, the answer is a resounding "Hell, yes!"

The Royal Bopsters Project was born out of veteran jazz vocalist Amy London's love and admiration for hipster-singer Mark Murphy. In 2010, she found Murphy, then 78, living in the Actors Fund Home in Englewood, New Jersey. After gently coaxing him into accompanying her to New York jazz clubs, she persuaded him to appear with her in a 2011 vocal concert at The New School, where London teaches, with a 10-voice student choir. She recruited ace vocal arranger and tenor Darmon Meader (of New York Voices fame), alto Holli Ross and a prodigious newcomer named Dylan Pramuk, and a new quartet was born.

What makes the album really extraordinary is the participation of four other masters of jazz singing and vocalese: Jon Hendricks (age 94), Annie Ross (85), Sheila Jordan (86) and Bob Dorough (91)—all of whom turn in spirited, agile performances.

Among the album's manifold pleasures are Murphy's audacious, pull-out-all-the-stops performances, including a bravura spoken-word selection from Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*. The reading perfectly complements London's newly minted vocalese lyric to Charlie Parker's "Chasin' The Bird." Hendricks sounds remarkably spry and musically witty as he trades "fours" with the nimble Pramuk on "Music In The Air (Wildwood)." Annie Ross and Jordan add poignancy and theatrical flair to their songs, "Music Is Forever" and "Peace," respectively. And Dorough navigates the dizzying, chromatic harmonies of "Nothing Like You Has Ever Been Seen Before" with the adroitness and sweet tones of a much younger man.

—Allen Morrison

The Royal Bopsters Project: Music In The Air (Wildwood): On The Red Clay (Red Clay); Peace: Basheer, The Snake And The Mirror; Señor Blues; Invitation; Bird Chasin' (Chasin' The Bird); Music Is Forever; Bebop Lives (Boplicity); Just Step Right Up; Nothing Like You Has Ever Been Seen Before; Let's Fly. (62:15)

Personnel: Amy London, Darmon Meader, Dylan Pramuk, Holli Ross, vocals; Jon Hendricks (1), Mark Murphy (2, 5, 7, 9), Sheila Jordan (3), Annie Ross (8), Bob Dorough (11), guest vocals; Steve Schmidt, piano; Sean Smith, Cameron Brown (3) bass; Steve Williams, drums; Steven Kroon, percussion; Roni Ben-Hur, guitar (12).

Ordering info: motema.com