

Reviews

abstract and the visceral. Producer Gerry Teekens deserves extra audio-geek kudos for panning DeRosa's bass toward the left side of the stereo spectrum and Strickland's drum kit toward the right rather than, as is far more common, orienting both in the center. It's a move that arguably gives listeners a better sense of what the rhythm section's doing, and ought to be considered more often.

MAC RANDALL

THEO HILL

PROMETHEAN (Posi-Tone)



Theo Hill is a dynamically percussive pianist, so it's not surprising that the musicians who have inspired him have been primarily drummers and likeminded keyboardists. As its title indicates, *Promethean* "steals fire" from these demigods—principally Tony Williams,

Mulgrew Miller, Herbie Hancock, Kenny Kirkland and Jeff "Tain" Watts—for a bold hard-bop showcase also featuring bassist Yasushi Nakamura and drummer Mark Whitfield Jr.

The album is book-ended by tunes inspired by the Williams-Miller tandem. "This Here," a funky, poppy melody Bobby Timmons wrote for Cannonball Adderley, is rendered closer to the spunkier piano-trio rendition found on Williams' *Young at Heart* disc. He closes with "Citadel," a burner from Williams' *Civilization* album with Miller. Dues are also paid to the less-heralded gentler side of Williams, via covers of the ballad "Pee Wee," from Miles' *Sorcerer* album, and Hancock's "Finger Painting," from the V.S.O.P. set list.

Hill feels more muddled and less incisive on "Blasphemy" and "Chance," two songs, from Kenny Kirkland's eponymous debut, with shifting moods. But these are exceptions—the dominant motif of *Promethean* is that of a young pianist reveling in the imperial command of his instrument. You hear it on his lone original, "The Phoenix," composed in tribute to Watts, which competes with "Citadel" and a cover of Chick Corea's "Litha" as the most incandescent, two-fisted hard-bop pieces on the disc. And don't overlook the stylish rendition of Duke Pearson's "Is That So," the rare occasion where the rhythm section is allowed a democratic share of the spotlight. **BRITT ROBSON**

TIM HAGANS & NDR BIGBAND

FACES UNDER THE INFLUENCE:

A JAZZ TRIBUTE TO JOHN CASSAVETES (NDR)



With few exceptions—a notable one being *Shadows*, his directorial debut, which employed the music of Mingus—the films of the late John Cassavetes were light on musical content. Cassavetes wanted his actors to dominate the scenes in which they appeared, and considered anything that would divert attention from their performances a distraction.

In essence, the trumpeter Tim Hagans was presented with the gift of a blank slate when he was commissioned by Germany's NDR Bigband to compose music with Cassavetes' works in mind. Serving as writer, arranger and conductor here, his trumpet employed only sparingly, Hagans focuses on characters from six classic films—*Shadows*, *A Woman Under the Influence*, *Faces*, *Husbands*, *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* and *Minnie and Moskowitz*—and gives them the scores they never had. For the final track, simply called "John Cassavetes," he nods to the director himself, whose work, the artist notes, has long kept his brain working overtime.

Hagans thinks in a cinematic fashion anyway, so writing for familiar characters so rich and vibrant had to have been a dream, and to have the resources of one of



► "The proto-hipster, post-noir vibe": Tim Hagans

Europe's best ensembles to flesh out his thoughts surely made the gig that much more rewarding. Cassavetes was fond of improvisation, and Hagans keeps things loose whenever the scenario allows. "Lelia," the grand opening number, captures the proto-hipster, post-noir vibe of *Shadows*' NYC setting, without slipping into the kind of faux-bebop clichés that uninformed directors of the period often resorted to. "Harry, Archie & Gus," the main men of *Husbands* (the director himself among them), are given an alternately swinging and swaggering theme, and the man of the hour, in the finale, is defined by moments of sheer chaos and unsullied delicacy, a fitting tribute indeed.

JEFF TAMARKIN

JASON KAO HWANG

SING HOUSE (Euonymus)



Jason Kao Hwang isn't the only violinist using his instrument in a context that relies equally on free improvisation and composition. But *Sing House* amply demonstrates the singular blend of passion and control he brings to the intersection. He's capable of attacking his instrument in a visceral manner akin to free-jazz horn players, but even when he plays in the upper register he never punctuates his solos with nails-on-the-chalkboard scrapes or squeals, preferring to keep the sound clear and crisp. That same sense of equilibrium applies to his writing, with its spaces for exciting group improvisation.

Sing House thrives on the longstanding rapport among the group members. Drummer Andrew Drury and bassist Ken Filiano have played with Hwang in several

PETER JOSYHN

other projects, some of which have included trombonist Steve Swell. Pianist Chris Forbes has worked in duos with Hwang as well as in bands led by Swell. “No Such Thing” begins the album with a brief written phrase, before shifting into unhinged energy that gives all the players equal say. After some blasts from Swell and wild bowing from the leader, Drury’s multidirectional drumming cues a relatively languid line built in the low register of the piano. Even then, the mood continually changes shape. “When What Could,” featuring Hwang on viola, begins slower, with pregnant pauses that evoke a new-music ensemble. Before long, though, the quintet springs into action; the leader plays double time over the rhythm section, and Filiano offers his strongest solo of the set. *Sing House* might rely heavily on free blowing, yet within the four works Hwang packs concise pieces of writing that present new discoveries with each listen. **MIKE SHANLEY**

ABDULLAH IBRAHIM

ANCIENT AFRICA (Sackville/Delmark)

Abdullah Ibrahim converted to Islam nearly five years before these solo-piano recordings were captured in Toronto on Feb. 18, 1973. But

Ibrahim had just come from a pilgrimage to Mecca, and the gusts of inspiration that sweep through these lengthy solo-piano excursions are from the mind and heart of the recommitted. They are certainly less pacific and austere than the bulk of his considerable output later in his career (and at age 83 he is still going strong).

Just shy of 20 minutes long, the three-part title track is dense and resonant, with after-tones that stem equally from his force of touch and his use of the sustain pedal. Ibrahim’s expansive phrases conflate sacred reverence and folk culture in a manner that is quintessentially African, and the pleasure of the mixture has him softly moaning, drawing comparisons to Keith Jarrett. Another three-part workout, “The Aloe and the Wild Rose,” is the most straight-ahead jazz on the disc, beginning with an intro that sounds like “Jitterbug Waltz” pushed through Monk’s angular maze. Ibrahim had been in exile from his native South Africa a decade when *Ancient Africa* was recorded, and the third and longest number, “Cherry/Bra Joe From Kilimanjaro,” is an open-hearted valentine to his native land.

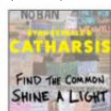
The first two songs here were originally

released as the album *Sangoma*, with the third song a part of the record *African Portraits*. The only previously unreleased track on this reissue is the finale, “Khotso,” a nine-minute bamboo flute and spoken-word recitation that works as a spiritual parable, although the potent flute work should win over even the non-devout. **BRITT ROBSON**

RYAN KEBERLE & CATHARSIS

FIND THE COMMON, SHINE A LIGHT

(Greenleaf)



With *Find the Common, Shine a Light*, trombonist Ryan Keberle has now issued three albums in five years with his piano-less ensemble Catharsis, each one a thoughtfully conceptual disc boasting Keberle’s superb arrangements. But this latest Catharsis outing sacrifices the prominence of the group’s musical virtues for topical social commentary.

The purpose here is to protest the election of Donald Trump, and, via music, set forth a psychological blueprint for resisting the advancement of his policies. It begins auspiciously: “Become the Water” is beautifully scored as a soft, billowing anthem reminiscent of Keberle’s mentor Maria Schneider, blending the consciousness theme of Keberle’s past few discs with gentle cheerleading for resistance as vocalist Camila Meza intones the album’s title refrain. “Al Otro Lado del Rio” (“Across the River”), by Uruguayan composer Jorge Drexler, continues the water theme, features the distinctive horn voicings of Keberle and trumpeter Mike Rodriguez, and recalls the emphasis on relatively obscure South American music that burnished last year’s Catharsis disc, *Azul Infinito*.

The rest of *Find the Common* is hardly a failure—Keberle doesn’t create bad music. But it’s almost entirely composed of overly familiar cover songs, like the Beatles’ “The Fool on the Hill” and Bob Dylan’s “The Times They Are A-Changin’,” mixed with short pieces, entitled “Empathy,” “Mindfulness” and “Strength,” that are too long to be mere interludes and too weighty to be tone poems, yet lack the full arc of typical Catharsis songs. Yes, Keberle loves his Beatles catalog, but compare “Mother Nature’s Son” by his double quartet

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