



Wabi Sabi
The Tiptons Sax Quartet & Drums (s/r)
I Love To See You Smile
3D Jazz Trio (Diva Jazz)
Eponymous
Artemis (Blue Note)
 by John Pietaro

In 1925 Lil Hardin Armstrong guided husband Louis stage-front and led his Hot Five from the shadows. Since then, women have taken the lead many times over, but the journey was in spite of a male-dominated industry.

Some 60+ years later this reviewer, rushing toward the downtown express at Union Square, became enraptured by the sound of four saxophonists playing magically interwoven lines. The train was missed but it was worth it. “We’re the Billy Tipton Memorial Saxophone Quartet,” Amy Denio announced to the whooping crowd. Tipton, who died in 1989, was a transgender male-identifying musician and bandleader of the ‘30s-70s whose closeted life inspired Denio and baritone saxophonist Babs Helle (now John Otto). The two founded the band in Seattle in 1988, though many others have come through the ranks, particularly after Denio and Jessica Lurie’s 2006 reformation of it as the Tiptons Sax Quartet. With two powerful altos (Lurie and Denio, doubling soprano and vocals, respectively), the current iteration is completed by Sue Orfield (tenor), Tina Richerson (baritone) and drummer Robert Kainar. If the band in its infancy was gripping, today it’s simply outstanding.

Wabi Sabi was inspired by the Japanese aesthetic principle of transience and imperfection and, ironically, produced an album that’s pretty damned perfect. On Richerson’s opener “December Dance”, the listener experiences tractor-beam transport to the Latin Quarter of long ago. Thriving on Kainar’s stormy presence, shifting mambos beneath *pasodobles* of a sort, the horns’ moves are unstoppable. This energy only strengthens through Denio’s fascinatingly arranged “El Gran Orinador”, flooded with solos. The title cut by Orfield maintains the dancefloor action before moving into a slower theme with soaring vocalized melody out front. Denio’s uniquely mournful voice shines in her “Root Dance” both before and during the start of a beautifully Balkan-inspired 7/8. The piece effortlessly melds this tradition with New Orleans, casting joyful lament. The second half of the album, then, stretches the concept further, a global embrace of culture championed through improvisation. Listen for Brazilian- and West African-inspired sounds, Eastern European modes, even jazz rock. The closer, Orfield’s “Working Song”, is anthemic, grown from a soft pentatonic strain, a call to order, perhaps to arms, as the saxophone choir insistently, symbolically sings and shouts over a steady beat.

I Love To See You Smile from pianist Jackie Warren, bassist Amy Shook and drummer Sherrie Maricle, is a set of (mostly) standards sitting firmly in the ‘40s-50s piano jazz tradition, though in this case, drummer-led. 3D, short for three divas, shines throughout, each with moments but always focusing on the whole. Their version of “Besame Mucho”, with layers of rhythm cascading from the drumkit and featuring crisp, swinging breaks, brings new life to an old gem. Danceability, not so much as a goal but rather a profound byproduct, propels the eight selections. While some of the adaptations are as expected, others are singular in approach (“Moonglow”). And the rich arco bass out front of “Angel Eyes”, accompanied by dark piano chords and only the subtlest of brushes, utterly lures in the ear. By the time bluesy piano— heavy on right-hand ostinato— takes the lead, even the casual listener will recognize the strength this track

would have as a single. The closer, “L.O.V.E.”, a beloved ballad, is heard uptempo with heat turned up during the trading of fours by Maricle and Shook, enlivening the entire set.

Jazz has always had “supergroups”, usually record label manipulations, ill-fitting ensemble members seeking the next bus out of the one-off. Not so Artemis, organized thoughtfully with a vision toward durability. As per musical director/pianist Renee Rosnes, “We came together when a European promoter requested an all-female ensemble, but after the second tour, we chose to make this a regular band.” In addition to Rosnes is clarinetist Anat Cohen, tenor saxophonist Melissa Aldana, trumpeter Ingrid Jensen, bassist Noriko Ueda, drummer Allison Miller and vocalist Cécile McLorin Salvant. The international, multi-generational septet was signed to the coveted Blue Note label to wide fanfare in later 2020.

The sounds on their eponymous debut are as tight, professional, swinging and hip as one would expect. Miller’s opener “Goddess of the Hunt” is a rollicking venture calling on the listener to join said foray with the band’s namesake. Miller offers layers of pulsations, driving the rest with Latin-esque fills ending in crackling accents. Locked in are Rosnes and Ueda, adding sparkle through heavy rhythm under melodic passages recalling Quincy Jones’ moving, throbbing scores. “Frida”, a minor-key work by Aldana with her roving tenor out front of clouded harmonies, carries much of the complexity and emotional distance in the great artist’s paintings. By contrast, Rosnes’ “Big Top” is overt, filled with rapid-fire runs and a sizzling drum solo. The strength of the pianist’s improvisation segment matches that of her comping, but unfortunately, this intensity doesn’t survive the rest of the date. The album embraces ‘inside’ playing, well, to the softer side – surely this isn’t problematic, but in the company of the many mellow sounds that just fit the dreaded “light jazz” genre, this hunt braves a more dangerous path than intended. Artemis’ level of artistry can and should ignite still newer generations of musicians, female and male, toward the untold strength of womanhood. It’s here, impatiently waiting, still struggling to be unleashed.

For more information, visit thetiptonssaxquartet.com, divajazz.com and bluenote.com



More Than Another Day
Lisa Hilton (Ruby Slippers Productions)
 by Mark Keresman

Pianist/composer Lisa Hilton counts both the influence of European-based classical music and jazz as her inspirations. *More Than Another Day* is her latest album and she has got a couple of aces up her sleeve: bassist Luques Curtis, who has a considerable Latin jazz resumé, and drummer Rudy Royston, often heard to good effect with trumpeter Dave Douglas, Bill Frisell and many others.

The title track, one of nine Hilton originals, is the opener and sets the pace nicely. It’s beautifully midtempo and has a cheery, sunshine-y feel. Cole Porter’s “I’ve Got You Under My Skin”, the set’s sole standard, is played for muted shadows; it’s still upbeat, but in a slightly guarded manner. Rich, gently rolling chords in the ornate introduction, framed by bass and drums, are faintly dramatic, adding a bit of turbulence. “Karma Chaos” is a nice midtempo cooker, Curtis and

Royston laying down a choppy magnetic rhythmic figure with Hilton jauntily essaying away over-top. One of the dandiest aspects of Hilton’s playing is her tidy, slightly witty sense of restraint. The closer, “Today I Looked At Love”, features lusciously lovely rhapsodic piano and crisp, considerably probing drumming.

More Than Another Day is a batch of easygoing jazz of considerable substance. It doesn’t cut corners nor is it high-handedly “artistic”. Hilton is an inheritor/successor to the mantle of Erroll Garner: classy, intelligent and accessible without bowing to commercial-type compromise.

For more information, visit lisahiltonmusic.com

IN PRINT



Nothing but the Music
Thulani Davis (Blank Forms Editions)
 by Kurt Gottschalk

Thulani Davis is a witness. She’s not just that, of course. She’s a talented poet. She’s a playwright, journalist, librettist, novelist and screenwriter. She’s a scholar and assistant professor of AfroAmerican studies at the University of Wisconsin.

She’s also a fan. Davis knows the musicians she references in *Nothing but the Music* well but remains and writes as a fan, which gives her expert testimony all the more weight.

Her expertise added voice to the Blank Forms reprinting of the late multi-instrumentalist Joseph Jarman’s *Black Case Vol. 1 & II: Return From Exile* in 2019, a poignant and revealing collection of poetry, prose and diary entries originally published in 1974. She wrote an introduction to that edition with the unique insight of having been married to the author.

Her circles through the orbits of Jarman and the Art Ensemble of Chicago (the band through which Jarman became a name in outré jazz households) and their associates of the decade after Albert Ayler and John Coltrane left the playing field inform this slim volume.

The book includes dedications to Cecil Taylor and Henry Threadgill, but also to Thelonious Monk—in a poem written on the day of his death in 1982—and choreographer Dianne McIntyre and an unknown street musician. They’re not always poems about those figures, but they’re inspired by encounters with their art. They’re verses about bearing witness.

Writing at, or soon after, or about a gig by Taylor, Andrew Cyrille and Jimmy Lyons, in a poem titled “C.T. at the Five Spot”, for example, Davis seems to reflect both internal and external states of being there: “commandin’ a state / of the meanness / of the sweetness / of the time it takes / of the space it needs / of the weight of old air / it breathes / & sees like knives thru the thickness of flesh / & the blindness of our very selves / I have heard this music / ever since I can remember / I have heard this music.” Davis’ vivid poems document moments from those fabled days not with setlists but with snapshots of her mind and soul.

For more information, visit blankforms.org/publication/thulani-davis-nothing-but-the-music