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IIMA Anthology 2003-2021, volume 2

**RICHARD COCHRANE:
MUSINGS REVIEWS
1995-2001**

ISBN 87-91425-19-0 (Vol.1-8)

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GENERAL PREFACE TO THE IIMA ANTHOLOGY

The IIMA Anthology collects some of the most unique and important contributions to International Improvised Music Archive. IIMA is an internet archive founded 2003 by Carl Bergstroem-Nielsen, Denmark. The present Anthology was not meant to replace the site which hosts a number of other contributions and links, but to act as a signpost and an extra reserve for preservation of some rare works. The site features more authors and possibly more by the individual authors than included here, so I can warmly recommended to find it by internet search.

The motivation behind IIMA was to make both a number of instructional scores / graphic scores / open compositions / compositions for improvisors /etc. easily available - and some theoretical texts, both as a supplement to what is available elsewhere.

For navigating: as a starting-point, disregard the hypertexts (although a few might work). Scroll and use the index table. Contents were pasted from the individual HTML pages in the web version or recreated from archived files. Do not hesitate to use the standard search function within the document, in order to move from the index section to the item in question – or to browse for names, etc. This is possible to a large extent because much of the content (not all, though, but this volume throughout) is rendered in text, not graphics format. Care has been taken to make everything well accessible and readable, but please observe peculiarities such as the above ones.

None of my own creative and research output is included here apart from some composer portraits and translation work (I was born 1951 in DK) but I suppose it will be available through internet search.

All works appeared in IIMA by permission.

Carl Bergstroem-Nielsen

EDITOR'S PREFACE TO THIS VOLUME

This pdf volume contains all of Richard Cochrane's CD reviews published on the Musings website. There are approximately 230 reviews, and they cover a maybe not so small part of what was released in these days. Thus they provide a unique piece of information pertinent to the history of improvised and experimental music. Informatively, thoughtfully and emphatically written, they provide insight in the diversity of approaches and aesthetics. They can be inspiring reading for all involved and for those just curious.

The author originally stated 1995-1999 as the time span covered. However, several items were released as far as 2001, and in one case I know for certain there can have been no press preview. Therefore this has been corrected, but it may be noted that review activity after 1999 may have been smaller than before. Of course many of the names covered appear in releases both before and after the limited time span of this collection, therefore the year limits need not mark a sharp dividing line of interest.

Everything in this volume is rendered in text, not graphics format, therefore you may use your computers' standard search function. Reviews appear in the order they receive mention in the index – please note that one review may cover several CDs – just one situation where you may need the search function. - For some few titles found in the index, reviews appear to be lost. Corrections were found to be possible in some cases having a mismatch between link spellings and their corresponding review pages, but not in all. If you cannot find the review by searching within the document either, then it's not here. But the index references have been left untouched, since at least they document that the CD in question received attention and probably a review. - Even though URLs in the links section may be obsolete, you may access them by double-clicking or right-clicking for the historical information.

As a curiosity – a number of reviews appear erroneously not to have come to final publishing before revising for this edition, due to typos in the programming (especially confusing htm with html and vice versa). Examples include John Zorn's Classic Guide to Strategy, and releases by Patrick Zimmerli Ensemble, Matt Turner and Trio Croch. They have also been corrected in the online IIMA edition.

Happy reading!

Carl Bergstroem-Nielsen 2021

AUTHOR's PREFACE

Musings

The Musings review site was run for four years (1995-1999) with (semi-)regular updates reviewing CDs of new music. The music was mostly, but not entirely, improvisational in nature, with a broad range from modern jazz to classical composition to conceptual art. Some wonderfully rich regional music scenes are represented here, as well as the work of maverick individuals and established greats.

Musings was proud and very lucky to be involved with such a fabulous community. Regrettably, I am no longer able to continue to update this site or accept material for new reviews. In its day, Musings was "famed" for reviewing just about everything it recieved -- now the odd CD which does arrive is passed on to other journalists or organisations who may be able to use it.

This page contains a list of every CD reviewed on (musings).

Once more, thanks to everyone who supported Musings. Anyone who would like to reproduce reviews from the site is welcome to do so, provided due credit is given.

Some visitors may be interested in [the musings links page](#) (no longer updated). Links to labels can be found on any page reviewing a release on that label.

Richard Cochrane

Editor's note. As stated in the preface, some reviews date later than 1999.

MUSINGS INDEX

[Alienstalk](#) (Sargasso: SCD28025)

Ellen Christi (vocals), Claudio Lodati (guitar), Luigi Archetti (guitar), Jan Schlegel (bass).

[Allen, Brian: Solo Trombone](#) (Braintone: No Number)

Brian Allen (trombone)

[Alterations: Alterations Live](#) (Intuitive: IRCD001)

Steve Beresford, Peter Cusack, Terry Day, David Toop (various instruments)

[Danish Intuitive Music.](#) (Intuitive: IRCD003)

Compositions by Jorgen Lekfeld, Carl Bergstrom-Nielsen, Ivan Eugen Vincze, Jorgen Plaetner

[Angeli, Paolo: Linee di Fuga](#) (PJP/Erosha: PJP002/ERH012)

Paolo Angeli (guitar)

[Archer, Martin: Ghost Lily Cascade](#) (Discus: 4CD)

Martin Archer (synthesisers, electronics, violin, saxophone, studio collages), Chris Bywater (synthesisers and electronics), Charlie Collins (electronics and flute), Michael W Evans (percussion), Simon H Fell (bass), John Jasnoch (guitars), Martin Jones (trumpet), Brian Parsons (vibes), Angie Rosenfeld (cello), Max Wall (bass guitar).

[Archer, Martin and Simon H Fell: Pure Water Construction](#) (Discus: 11CD)

Martin Archer (studio collages, percussion, synthesisers, saxophone), Simon H Fell (bass, bass guitar, studio collages), Gino Robair (percussion), Robin Hayward (tuba), Chris Burn (piano), Rhodri Davies (harp), Jenni Molloy (cello), Stefan Jaworzyn (guitar), Charlie Collins (bass clarinet).

[Archer, Martin: 88 Enemies](#) (Discus: 10CD)

Martin Archer (electric piano, sampler, compositions).

[Archer, Martin: Winter Pilgrim Arriving](#) (Discus: 12CD)

Martin Archer (synths, soprano sax, clarinets, recorders, "vioelectronics"), Benjamin Bartholemew (guitars), Derek Saw (cornet), Simon H Fell (bass), Tim Cole (guitar), Charlie Collins (flute, sampling), Gino Robair (percussion, one track only), James Archer (objects, one track only), Mick Beck (bassoon), Sedayne (crwth, one track only)

[Asano, Koji: Flow-Augment](#) (Solstice: 12)

Koji Asano (compositions)

[Asano, Koji: Preparing for April](#) (Solstice: 13)

Koji Asano (compositions)

[Asano, Koji: The Secret Path of Rain](#) (Solstice: 15)

Koji Asano (composition)

[Asano, Koji: Momentum](#) (Solstice: 14)

Koji Asano (compositions)

[Asano, Koji: The Last Shade of Evening Falls](#) (Solstice: 16, 17, 18 and 19)

Koji Asano (composition and realisation)

[Asano, Koji: Quoted Landscape](#) (Solstice: 20)

Koji Asano (composition and realisation)

[Ask: Disconnected Bliss](#) (Discus: 8CD)

Martin Archer (electronics, saxophone), John Jasnoch (guitar, electronics).

[Assumed Possibilities](#) (Confront : FRONT05)

Chris Burn (piano), Rhodri Davies (harp), Phil Durrant (violin), Mark Wastell (cello)

[Bailey, Derek and Steve Lacy: Outcome](#) (Potlatch: P299)

Derek Bailey (guitar), Steve Lacy (soprano sax)

[Bailey, Derek: Fairly Early with Postscripts](#) (Emanem : 4027)

Derek Bailey (guitar), Anthony Braxton (flute, sax), Kent Carter (bass), John Stevens (drums)

[Bailey, Derek and Joelle Leandre: No Waiting](#) (Potlatch: P198)

Derek Bailey (guitar), Joelle Leandre (bass).

[Band, Ellen: 90% Post Consumer Sound](#) (XI Records: XI124)

Ellen Band (tapes etc)

[Bassresponse: Bassresponse](#) (Owlsong: OWL2001)

Vattel Cherry (bass), Jane Wang (bass), Alan Lewine (bass), David Kaczorowski (bass), Marjani Dele (voice, one track only), Benjamin Tomassetti (alto sax, one track only), Daniel Powell (tenor sax, one track only)

[Bickerton, John: Shadow Boxes](#) (Leo Lab: CD064)

John Bickerton (piano), Matthew Heyner (bass), Rashid Bakr (drums).

[Beins/Davies/Wastell: The Sealed Knot](#) (Confront: FRONT06)

Burkhard Beins (drums), Rhodri Davies (harp), Mark Wastell (cello)

[Bentzon, Niels Viggo: Solo Piano Improvisations](#) (Av-Art: AACD1004)

Niels Viggo Bentzon (piano, prepared piano).

[Beresford, Coombes, Smith & Day: Three and Four Pullovers](#) (Emanem: 4038)

Steve Beresford (toys, electronics etc), Nigel Coombes (violin, electronics), Roger Smith (guitar), Terry Day (percussion, alto saxophone, cello, mandolin)

[Berger, Karl and Edward Blackwell: Just Play](#) (Emanem: 4037)

Karl Berger (vibes, balafon, darbuka), Edward Blackwell (drums)

[Bisio, Michael & Eyvind Kang: MBEK](#) (Meniscus: MNSCS005)

Michael Bisio (bass), Eyvind Kang (violin)

[Bohman, Adam: Last Orders](#) (Mycophile: SPOR03)

Adam Bohman (amplified objects).

[Bonefied: Trombone Revenge](#) (Zerx: 018)

J A Deane (tenor trombone, bass flute, shakuhachi, percussion), Steve Feld (trombones, euphonium, sousaphone, text), Kurt Heyl (tenor trombone, flutes, percussion, voice), Gary Sherman (trombones, "flugelbone", tuba), Jefferson Voorhees (drums, percussion), Mark Weaver (tuba, tenor trombone)

[Bonehouse: Click](#) (Nerve Technologies : nerve001)

Phil Morton (guitar, treatments), Phil Hargreaves (saxophones, flute)

[Botti, Paolo: Leggende Metropolitane](#) (Caligola: 2035-2)

Paolo Botti (viola), Alessandro Bosetti (soprano sax), Marina Ciccarelli (trombone), Tito Mangialajo Rantzer (bass), Filippo Monico (drums)

[Bouhalassa, Ned: Aerosol](#) (Diffusion i Media: IMED9840)

Ned Bouhalassa (electronics).

[Bowers, Graham: Transgression](#) (Red Wharf: RWCD002)

Graham Bowers (composition).

[Bowers, Richard: Nocturne](#) (Simulacrum: No number)

Richard Bowers (composition)

[Brasserie Trio: Musique Mecaniques](#) (Leo: CDLR269)

Carlo Actis Dato (reeds), Alberto Mandarini (trumpet), Lauro Rossi (trombone).

[Braxton, Anthony and Stewart Gillmore: 14 Compositions \(Traditional\) 1996](#) (Leo: CDLR259)

Anthony Braxton (reeds), Stewart Gillmore (piano, brass instruments).

[Braxton, Anthony: Composition No 94 for Three Instrumentalists \(1980\)](#) (Golden Years of New Jazz : GY3)

Anthony Braxton (reeds), Ray Anderson (trombones, cornet, trumpet), James Emery (guitars, electronics)

[Braxton, Anthony: Knitting Factory \(Piano/Quartet\) 1994, Vol 2](#) (Leo: CDLR297/298)

Anthony Braxton: Piano, Marty Ehrlich (reeds), Joe Fonda (bass), Pheeroan AkLaff (drums)

[Braxton, Anthony: Composition N.247](#) (Leo: CDLR306)

Anthony Braxton (reeds), James Fei (reeds), Matthew Welch (bagpipes)

[Brennan, John Wolf: Moskau-Petruschki/Felix-Szenen](#) (Leo Lab: CD034)

John Wolf Brennan (piano and compositions).

[Brennan, John Wolf: The Well-Prepared Clavier](#) (Creative Works Records CW1032)

John Wolf Brennan (piano and compositions).

[Brennan, John Wolf: Text, Context, Co-Text and Co-Co-Text](#) (Creative Works: CW1025)

John Wolf Brennan (piano, compositions)

[John Wolf Brennan HeXteT: ...through the Ear of a Raindrop](#) (Leo: CDLR254)

Julie Tippets (voice), Peter Whyman (bass clarinet), Evan Parker (saxophones), Paul Rutherford (trombone), John Wolf Brennan (piano, compositions), Chris Cutler (percussion)

[Brennan/Coleman/Wolfarth: Momentum](#) (Leo: CDLR274)

John Wolf Brennan (piano, prepared piano), Gene COleman (bass clarinet, melodica), Christian Wolfarth (percussion)

[Breschand/Doneda/Zbinden: L'Intense](#) (For4Ears: CD1138)

Helene Breschand (harp), Michel Doneda (soprano sax), Gerald Zbinden (electric guitar)

[Brotzmann, Peter: Noise of Wings](#) (Slask: SLACD019)

Peter Brotzmann (tenor sax, tarogato, clarinet), Peter Friis Nielsen (electric bass), Peeter Uuskyla (drums)

[Bubbados, The: We're Really Making Music Now](#) (Zerx: 014)

Mark Weaver (tuba), Stefan Dill (guitar, trumpet), Bubba D (lap steel, bass flute, piano, drums), Mark Weber (covals, guitar, violin, harmonica), Ken Keppeler (violin, mandolin, banjo, accordion, harmonica)

[BTMZ: 11 Ways to Proceed](#) (For 4 Ears: CD1035)

Hans Burgener (violin), Richard Teitelbaum (electronics), Gunter Muller (electronics, drums), Carlos Zingaro (MIDI violin) *SORRY - this file is unavailable!*

[Burn, Chris: Music for Three Rivers](#) (Victo: CD050)

Chris Burn (Piano). *SORRY - this file is unavailable!*

[Butcher, John: Music on Seven Occasions](#) (Meniscus: 004)

John Butcher (sax), Gino Robair (percussion), Alexander Frangenheim (bass), Veryan Weston (piano), Thomas Lehn (synthesiser), John Corbett (guitar), Jeb Bishop (trombone), Terri Kapsalis (violin), Fred Lonberg-Holm (cello), Michael Zerang (percussion, tubaphone) Meniscus: 004)

John Butcher (sax), Gino Robair (percussion), Alexander Frangenheim (bass), Veryan Weston (piano), Thomas Lehn (synthesiser), John Corbett (guitar), Jeb Bishop (trombone), Terri Kapsalis (violin), Fred Lonberg-Holm (cello), Michael Zerang (percussion, tubaphone)

[Butcher, John & Dylan Van der Schyff: Points, Snags and Windings](#) (Meniscus: 010)

John Butcher (saxophones), Dylan van der Schyff (percussion)

[Butcher/Durrant/Russell: The Scenic Route](#) (Emanem : 4029)

John Butcher (saxophones), Phil Durrant (violin), John Russell (guitar).

[Butcher/Charles/Dorner: The Contest of Pleasures](#) (Potlatch: P201)

John Butcher (saxophones), Xavier Charles (clarinet), Axel Dorner (trumpet)

[Carbon/Elliott Sharp: Interference](#) (Atavistic: ALP50CD)

Elliott Sharp (guitars, samples, saxophones, computer), Zeena Parkins (electric harp), Marc Sloan (bass), Joseph Trump (drums), David Weinstein (sampler).

[Carter, Kent and Albrecht Maurer: The Juillaguet Collection](#) (Emanem: 4033)

Kent Carter (bass), Albrecht Maurer (violin).

[CCM4: Construction, Destruction, Recreation](#)(Newsonic: 12)

Pete Cafarella (accordion, piano, computer), Rafael Cohen (oboe, English horn, computer), Seth Misterka (reeds, computer).

[CCM4: Destroys New York](#)(Newsonic: 14)

Pete Cafarella (accordion, piano, computer), Rafael Cohen (oboe, English horn, computer), Seth Misterka (reeds, computer).

[Reviewed with "Construction, Destruction, Recreation".]

[Chadbourne, Eugene: Worms with Strings](#) (Leo: CDLR264)

Eugene Chadbourne (stringed instruments), George Cremaschi (bass), Brent Dunn (bass), Bob Jordan (tapes, objects etc), Carla Kihlstedt (violin), Barry Mitterhof (mandolin), Ted Reichman (accordion, piano), Brian Ritchie (bass guitar etc), Charles Rosina (tapes and effects), Leslie Ross (bassoon), Rik Rue (tapes), Carrie Shull (oboe), Tony Trischka (banjo).

[Chadbourne, Eugene: Beauty and the Bloodsucker](#) (Leo: CDLR270)

Eugene Chadbourne (guitars, truntables, studio editing etc), Ashley Adams (bass), Ellery Eskelin (tenor sax), Lyn Johnston (contrabass clarinet, one track only), Jeff Kaiser (trumpet, euphonium), Carla Kihlstedt (violin, one track only), Rob Mallard (tenor sax, flute), Jacques Palinckx (electric guitar), Dan Plonsey (reeds), Garth Powell (percussion), Brian Ritchie (bass guitar), Gino Robair (percussion, one track only), Varrie Shull (oboe), Lukas Simonis (electric guitar), Jeff Sipes (percussion), Leonid Soybelman (classical guitar)

[Chadbourne, Eugene: Piramida Cu Povesti](#) (Leo: CDLR304)

Eugene Chadbourne (guitar)

[Chadbourne/Bennink/Kondo: Jazz Bunker](#) (Leo: GY7/8)

Eugene Chadbourne (guitar etc), Han Bennink (percussion, reeds etc), Toshinori Kondo (trumpet etc)

[Chadbourne, Eugene: I Talked to Death in Stereo](#) (Leo: CDLR283/284)

Eugene Chadbourne (guitar, compositions) with various groups

[Chamaeleo Vulgaris: Overture Facile](#) (Leo: CD061)

Frederick Galiay (electric bass, live electronics, voice), Jean-Sebastien Mariage (guitar, electronics), Bertrand Denzler (tenor sax, microphone, effects), Gilbert Roggi (drums, percussion), Frank Vaillant (drums), Bertrand Perrin (sampler, piano), Simon Pillar (cello, one track only)

[Chatham, Rhys: Hard Edge](#) (The Wire Editions: 9002-2)

Rhys Chatham (trumpet), Lou Ciccotelli (percussion), Gary Jeff (bass guitar, electronics), Gary Smith (guitar), Pat Thomas (guitar, electronics) .

[Vattel Cherry: Is it Because I'm Black?](#) (Commercial Free Jazz: CFJC0002)

Vattel Cherry (bass, percussion, voice)

[Cherry, Vattel: For Those Who Heal](#) (Maraschino Music: No number)

F Vattel Cherry (bass), John Dierker (bass clarinet), Peter Hickey (bass), Blaise Siwula (alto sax), John Voigt (bass), Ras Chris (guitar, harmonica, bamboo fulte, percussion)

[Cohn, Steve: Bridge over the X-Stream](#) (Leo: CDLR288)

Steve Cohn (piano, shakuhachi, hichiriki, shofar, percussion), Reggie Workman (bass, percussion), Jason Hwang (violin), Tom Varner (French horn)

[Cole, Bill: The Untempered Ensemble, Duets & Solos Vol 1](#) (Boxholder: BXH001)

Bill Cole (reeds), Cooper-More (horizontal hoe-handle harp, diddley bow), Warren Smith (percussion), William Parker (bass, one track only)

[Coleman, James: Zuihitsu](#) (Sedimental: SEDCD30)

James Coleman (theremin), Greg Kelley (trumpet), Tatsuya Nakatani (percussion), Vic Rawlings (cello, sarangi, electronics), Bhob Rainey (saxophone), Liz Tonne (voice), The Undr Quartet.

[Copeland, Darren: Rendu Visible](#) (Diffusion i Media: IMED9841)

Darren Copeland (electronics).

[Corbett, John and Heavy Friends: I'm Sick about my Hat](#) (Atavistic: ALP1116CD)

John Corbett (guitars, montages, voice), Jane Baxter Miller (voice, one track only), Peter von Bergen (reeds, one track only), Jeb Bishop (trombone, one track only), Hamid Drake (percussion, one track only), David Grubbs (voice, one track only), Mats Gustafsson (reeds, voice), Terri Kapsalis (voice, one track only), Fred Lonberg-Holm (cello).

[Coxhill, Lol: Toverbal Sweet... Plus](#) (Mushroom: SEECD480)

Lol Coxhill (reeds), Pierre Courbois (drums, percussion), Jasper Van't Hof (electric and acoustic pianos).

[Coxhill, Lol: Alone and Together](#) (Emanem: 4034)

Lol Coxhill (saxophones), Stevie Wishart (violin, hurdy gurdy), Marcio Mattos (cello, electronics) (one track only).

[Dato, Carlo Actis: The Moonwalker](#) (Leo: CDLR311)

Carlo Actis Dato (reeds) .

[Marraffa, Edoardo: Solo](#) (Bassesferec: BS005)

Edoardo Marraffa (tenor sax)

[Day & Taxi: About](#) (Percaso: 17)

Christoph Gallio (reeds), Dominique Girod (bass), Dieter Ulrich (drums).

[Day & Taxi: Less and More](#) (Percaso: UTR4121CD)

Christoph Gallio (saxophones), Dominique Girod (bass), Dieter Ulrich (drums)

[Deane, J A: Out of Context](#) (Zerx: 013)

J A Deane (conducting, electronics, bass flute), Stefan Dill (guitars), Steve Feld (euphonium). Tom Guralnick (soprano sax, electronics), Katie Harlow (cello), Rod Harrison (acting), Joseph Sabella (drums), Courtney Smith (harp), Alicia Ultan (viola), Jefferson Voorhees (drums), Mark Weaver (tuba)

[DeCellis, Dan: Chamber Music](#) (Sachimay: SCA9350)

Dan DeCellis (piano), James Coleman (theremin), Anita DeCellis (voice), Katt Fernandez (violin), Gary Fieldman (percussion)

[DeCellis, Dan: With More than a Passing Interest](#) (Sachimay: no number)

Dan deChellis (piano), Katt Hernandez (violin), Gary Fieldman (percussion), Anita deChellis (voice), James Coleman (theremin)

[DeCellis, Dan and Philip Tomasic: As If To Remind Us](#) (Sachimay: no number)

Dan deChellis (piano), Philip Tomasic (guitar)

[Delbecq, Benoit: Pursuit](#) (Songlines: SGL11529-2)

Benoit Delbecq (piano), Francois Houle (calrinet), Michael Moore (reeds), Jean-Jacques Avenel (bass), Steve Arguelles (drums, electronics), Marc Ducret (guitar, one track only)

[Denzler, Bertrand: Y?](#) (Leo Lab : CD053)

Bertrand Denzler (tenor sax), Benoit Delbecq (piano and prepared piano), Helene Labarriere (bass), Norbert Pfammatter (drums and percussion)

[Deplete Coitus](#) (no label)

Taylor Carrasco (compositions)

[Derendinger, Ueli : San Ya](#) (Percaso Productions : 14)

Ueli Derendinger (shakuhachi)

[Denmark's Intuitive Music Conference 1997](#) (Av-Art: DIMC001)

Claus Bech-Nielsen (Accordian), Carl Bergstøm-Nielsen (French horn, voice), Frank Heisler (percussion), Helene Jerg (cello), René Morgenseen (saxophones), Nisima Marie Munk-Madsen (flute), Gerhard Pischinger (flute), Henrik Rasmussen (penny whistle), Robert Cole Rizzi (guitar), Johan Toft (marimba), Ivan Vinzce (viola), Kumi Wakoo (swanee whistle, voice).

[Denmark's Intuitive Music Conference 1998](#) (Mesostics: MESCD0006)

Carl Bergstom-Nielsen (french horn, voice, penny whistle, percussion), Henrik Ehland Rasmussen (recorder, percussion, kalimba, voice), Frank Hiesler (percussion), Helene Jerg (cello, voice), Johan Toft (marimba), Ivan Vincze (viola), Kumi Wakao (violin, voice)

[Diaz-Infante, Ernesto and Chris Forsyth: Left & Right](#) (Bottom Feeder/Pax: BF04/PR90227)

Ernesto Diaz-Infante (guitar), Chris Forsyth (guitar).

[Diaz-Infante, Ernesto and Chris Forsyth: Wires and Wooden Boxes](#) (Pax: EE03/PR90252)

Ernesto Diaz-Infante, Chris Forsyth (guitar, piano, little instruments)

[Diaz-Infante, Ernesto: Ucross Journal](#) (Bottom Feeder/Pax: BF04/PR90249)

Ernesto Diaz-Infante (piano).

[Diaz-Infante, Ernesto: Solus](#) (Pax Recordings: PR90250)

Ernesto Diaz-Infante (piano)

[Dolmen Orchestra: Sequenze Armoniche](#) (Leo Records: CDLR291)

Pino Melfi (trumpet), Marco Sannini (trumpet), Alfredo Sette (trumpet), France Angiulo (trumbone), Michele Marrano (french horn), Nino Bisceglie (tuba), Paola Cicoella (flute), Nicola Puntillo (clarinets), Vittorio Gallo (sax), Felice Mezzina (sax), Gaetano Partipilo (sax), Pasquale Gadaleta (bass), Antonio Dambrosio (drums), Aldo Bagnoni (percussion), Armanda Desider (percussion), Linda Bsiri (voice, sea trumpet), Michel Godard (tuba, serpent), John Surman (sax), Nicola Pisani (conducting), Vico Miloli (trumpet, one track only), Enrico Del

Gaudio (percussion, one track only), Giovannangelo De Gennaro (voice)

[Doneda, Michel: Anatomie des Clefs](#) (Potlatch : P598)

Michel Doneda (soprano sax)

[Dorner/Lonberg-Holm/Zerang: Claque](#) (Meniscus: MNCS006)

Axel Dorner (trumpet), Fred Lonberg-Holm (cello), Michael Zerang (percussion, tubaphone)

[Duval, Dominic: Equinox](#) (Leo: CDLR267)

Dominic Duval (bass, mallets, piano, cymbal, voice), Tomas Ulrich (cello, voice, whistle), Michael Jefry Stevens (piano, mallets).

[Duval, Dominic: Asylem](#) (Leo: CDLR316)

Dominic Duval (bass, electronics), Herb Robertson (trumpet, little instruments), Bob Hovey (trombone, turntable, voice), Jay Rosen (percussion)

[Duval, Dominic with the CT String Quartet: Under the Pyramid](#) (Leo: CDLR279)

Dominic Duval (bass), Tomas Ulrich (cello), Jason Hwang (violin), Ron Lawrence (viola)

[Duval, Dominic and Joe McPhee: The Dream Book](#) (Cadence: CJR1105)

Joe McPhee (alto sax, trumpet), Dominic Duval (bass).

[Duval, Dominic String Ensemble: Live in Concert](#) (Cadence: CJR1097)

Jason Hwang (violin), Tomas Ulrich (cello), Dominic Duval (bass), Joe McPhee (tenor sax, trumpet), Mark Whitecage (reeds).

[Duval/Heward/McPhee: Undersound](#) (Leo: CDLR295)

Dominic Duval (bass), John Heward (percussion), Joe McPhee (soprano sax)

[Faaet/Deane: Grand Cross Eclipse](#) (Zerx: 024)

Al Faaet (drums), J A Deane (trombone, electronics, standing waves, bass flute)

[Falascone, Massimo: Bordogna -- 15 \(Quasi\) Solo Improvisations](#) (Takla : TAKLA1)

Massimo Falascone (saxophones, tugombuto), Leonardo Falascone (objects, one track only)

[Falascone, Monico & Locatelli: Takla Makan](#) (CMC: 9970-2)

Massimo Falascone (reeds), Giancarlo Locatelli (clarinets), Filippo Monico (drums), Simonetta Artuso (voice), Fabrizio Spera (drums), Barre Phillips (bass)

[Fei, James: Solo Works](#) (Leo Lab : CD059)

James Fei (reeds)

[Fei, James: For Saxophone with Card Reed and Gated Amplification/Camptown Races 1](#) (Organised

Sound Recordings: no number)

James Fei (reeds)

[Feigin/Hiltgren/Smith: They Are We Are](#) (Leo Lab: CD071)

Misha Feigin (guitar), Craig Hultgren (cello), LaDonna Smith (violin)

[Feigin, Misha: Both Kinds of Music](#) (Leo Lab: CD060)

Misha Feigin (balalaika, classical guitar), in duet with Elliot Sharp (dobro), Davey Williams (electric guitar), LaDonna Smith (violin, dancing on a woden box), Craig Hultgren (cello), Eugene Chadbourne (banjo, guitar)

[Fell, Simon H: Compilation III: Composition No 30](#) (Bruce's Fingers: BF27)

Simon H Fell (Bass), Charles Wharf (reeds), John Butcher (reeds), Mick Beck (tenor sax), Alan Wilkinson (baritone sax), Mark Wastell (cello), Stefan Jaworzyn (guitar), Colin Medlock (guitar), Damien Bowskill (guitar), Rhodri Davies (harp), Orphy Robinson (vibes), Paul Hession (drums), Mark Sanders (drums), RNCM big band (dir. Clark Rundell), Anglia X Ensemble (dir. SHF).

[Fell, Simon H and Charles Wharf: Frankenstein](#) (Bruce's Fingers: BF25)

Simon H Fell (Bass), Charles Wharf (reeds).

[Fernandez, Agusti and Christoph Irmer: Ebro Delta](#) (Hybrid: CD18)

Agusti Fernandez (piano), Christoph Irmer (violin)

[Fiedler/Koen/Ware: 110 Bridge St](#) (CIMP: 185)

Joe Fiedler (trombone), Ben Koen (reeds), Ed Ware (drums)

[FJQ](#) (RM: RM001)

Ntshuks Bonga (alto sax), Alfredo Genovesi (guitar), Jerry Bird (bass), Robin Musgrove (drums).

[Fonda, Joe & Xu Fengxia: Distance](#) (Leo Lab: CD069)

Joe Fonda (bass, voice), Xu Fengxia (guzheng, voice)

[Fonda-Stevens Group: Live at the Bunker](#) (Leo: CDLR301)

Joe Fonda (bass), Michael Jefry Stevens (piano), Paul SMoker (trumpet), Harvey Sorgen (drums)

[Foussat, Jean-Marc: Nouvelles](#) (Potlatch: P301)

Jean-Marc Foussat (compositions, tapes, keyboards, voice etc), F Pastorelli (voice), P Bouscaillou (bass), M Bohy (percussion), J Berrocal (trumpet), J-F Pauvros (guitar), R Turner (voice)

[Fred Frith Guitar Quartet](#) (Ambiances Magnetiques: AM063CD)

Fred Frith, Mark Stewart, Nick Didkovsky, Rene Lussier (guitars).

[Ganelin Trio: Con Affetto](#) (Golden Years of New Jazz : GY2)

Vyacheslav Ganelin (piano, horns, percussion, little instruments), Vladimir Tarasov (percussion, horn), Vladimir Chekasin (reeds, percussion)

[Ganelin Trio: Poco-a-Poco](#) (Leo: CDLR101)

Vyacheslav Ganelin (piano, basset horn, dulcimer, guitar), Vladimir Tarasov (drums), Vladimir Chekasin (reeds, wooden flutes, ocarina, voice)

[Ganelin Trio: Strictly For Our Friends](#) (Golden Years of New Jazz: GY13)

Vyacheslav Ganelin (piano), Vladimir Tarasov (drums), Vladimir Chekasin (reeds) .

[Geerken Tchicai Moye: Cassava Balls](#) (Golden Years of New Jazz : GY4)

Hartmut Geerken (piano, percussion, little instruments etc), John Tchicai (reeds, percussion), Famoudou Don Moye (percussion)

[Gelb, Philip: Between/Waves](#) (Sparkling Beatnik: SBR0006)

Philip Gelb (shakuhachi), Pauline Oliveros (accordion, conch), Jon Raskin (saxophones), Dana Reason (piano), Chris Brown (electronics).

[Gies, Joachim: Different Distances](#) (Leo Lab: CD052)

Duets with Ute Doring (voice), Alex Nowitz (voice, electronics), Ernst-Ludwig Petrowsky (alto sax), Thomas Wiedermann (trombone), Thomas Bohm-Christl (cello).

[Gies, Joachim: Whispering Blue](#) (Leo Lab: CD074)

Joachim Gies (reeds)

[Glass Onion](#) (GO: GO1)

Fabien Duscombs (percussion), Vincent Ferrand (bass, voice), Pascal Pourre (guitar, voice), Claire Suhubiette-Ferrand (voice, piano), Fabien Vergez (sax) - *SORRY - this file is unavailable!*

[Goldstein and Wilson: Monsun](#) (True Muze: TUMUCD9801)

Malcolm Goldstein (violin), Peter Niklas Wilson (bass)

[Golia, Vinny: Clarient](#) (Meniscus: 008)

Vinny Golia (clarinet)

[Goodheart, Matthew: Songs from the Time of Great Questioning](#) (Meniscus: MNSCS001)

Matthew Goodheart (piano)

[Granelli, Jerry: Enter, a Dragon](#) (Songlines: SGL1523-2)

Chris Speed (clarinet, tenor sax), Peter Epstein (soprano and alto sax), Briggan Krauss (alto sax), Curtis Hasselbring (trombone), Jamie Saft (keys, guitar), J Anthony Granelli (bass), Jerry Granelli (drums)

[Gratowski/Graewe/Lovens: Quicksand](#) (Meniscus: 007)

Frank Gratkowski (reeds), Georg Graewe (piano), Paul Lovens (percussion)

[Guyvoronsky and Petrova: Chonyi Together](#) (Leo: CDLR268)

Vyacheslav Guyvoronsky (trumpet), Evelin Petrova (accordion).

[Hall, Glen: Hallucinations](#) (Leo: CDLR273)

Glen Hall (reeds, electronics, voice), Roswell Rudd (trombone), Nilan Perera (guitar), John Lennard (drums), Rob Clutton (bass), Barry Elmes (drums), John Gzowski (stringed instruments), Georgie McDonald (percussion), Judith Merrill (voice), Allan Molnar (vibes, marimba, tapes), Kim Ratcliff (guitars, banjo), Don Thompson (bass, piano)

[Hall, Glen and Outsource: The Roswell Incident](#) (Leo: CDLR313)

Glen Hall (reeds, electronics), Roswell Rudd (trumpbone), Allan Molnar (vibes), Michael Morse (bass), Michael Occhipinti (guitar, banjo), Banjo Barry Romberg (drums)

[Halliwell, Graham and Simon H Fell: Nine Points in Ascent](#) (Bruce's Fingers: BF24)

Graham Halliwell (reeds), Simon H Fell (Bass).

[Haunted House: Up in Flames](#) (Erstwhile: 002)

Loren Mazzacane Connors (guitar), Suzanne Langille (voice), Andrew Burnes (guitar), Neel Murgai (daf).

[High Desert Duo: Inside the Landscape](#) (Zerx: 026)

Kurt Heyl (trombone, voice, cornet, percussion), Dave Nielsen (drums, reeds, vibes, percussion)

[Hodgekinson, Tim: Pragma](#) (Recommended Records: TH1)

Tim Hodgekinson (composition) -- various performers.

[Homo-Genetic Arsonist: Fuck Theory... Just Play, Goddamit](#) (Unsound Automatic : UACD008)

Miggy Harries (guitar, vocals), Dafydd Harris (keyboards, guitar), Bill Bargefoot (bass), Rick Dragger (drums), The Jelly-bean King (drums)

[Homo-Genetic Arsonist: The Proverbial Flaming Domicile](#) (Unsound Automatic: UACD014)

Mig Harries (vocals, guitar, drums), Peredur Gwladus (bass), Manwell Greig (keyboards), Dafydd Harries (keyboards), Rick Dragger (drums, vocals)

[Hopper, Kev: Spoombung](#) (Thoofa: THOOF1)

Kev Hopper (bass guitar, musical saw, electronics), Ian Smith (trumpet, flugelhorn), Adam Brett (sampler), Charles Heyward (bells), John Butcher (saxophones).

[Hopper, Kev: Whispering Foils](#) (Duophonic Super 45s: DS45-CD26)

Kev Hopper (bass, saw, samples), Janie Armour (accordion, organ), Charles Hayward (cymbals), Dominic Murcott (percussion), Sean O'Hagan (guitar, voice), Andrea Spain (clarinets), Ian Smith (flugelhorn, trumpet)

[Horn/Kendig/Dickey: Screwdriver!](#) (Leo Lab: CD051)

Walter Horn (keyboards), Gary Kendig (drums), Hugh Dickey (guitar, clarinet), Eric Hipp (tenor sax).

[Hotz, Gregor: Solo](#) (FMP: OWN90012)

Gregor Hotz (reeds), Nicholas Bussman (cello)

[Houle, Francois: In the Vernacular](#) (Songlines: SGL1522-2)

Francois Houle (clarinet), Dave Douglas (trumpet), Peggy Lee (cello), Mark Dresser (bass), Dylan van der Schyff (drums)

[Houle, Francois and Benoit Delbecq: Nancali](#) (Songlines: SGL1519-2)

Francois Houle (clarinet), Benoit Delbecq (piano)

[Hubbub: Ub/Abu](#) (For4Ears: No Number)

Frederic Blondy (piano), Bertrand Denzler (tenor sax), Jean-luc Guionnet (reeds), Jean-Sebastien Mariage (guitar), Edward Perraud (drums)

[Huber, Klaus: Al Fresco: Bilder Keiner Ausstellung](#) (Unit: UTR4103)

Klaus Huber (Piano).

[Hume, Carolyn & Paul May: By Lakes Abandoned](#) (Leo Lab: CD077)

Carolyn Hume (piano, keyboards, recorder), Paul May (drums), Duke Garwood (clarinets), Sonja Galsworthy (voice, one track only)

[Icarus](#) (FMR: CD15-V11298)

Philipp Wachsmann (violin, electronics), Roger Curphy (double bass), Mark Wastell (cello), Carol Ann Jackson (voice), Trevor Taylor (percussion, electronics).

[Isbin, Gilbert: Soloworks](#) (Tonesetters: TS003)

Gilbert Isbin (guitar).

[Isbin, Gilbert: plays Nick Drake](#) (Traurige Tropfen: 008)

Gilbert Isbin (guitar).

[Iskra 1903: Chapter One, 1970-2](#) (Emanem: CDLR287)

Paul Rutherford (trombone, piano), Derek Bailey (guitar), Barry Guy (bass)

[IST: Anagrams to Avoid](#) (Siwa: SIWA#3)

Rhodri Davis (harp), Simon H Fell (bass), Mark Wastell (cello).

[IST: Consequences of Time and Space](#) (Confront: FRONT04)

Rhodri Davis (harp), Simon H Fell (bass), Mark Wastell (cello).

[Reviewed with "Anagrams to Avoid"]

[IST: Ghost Notes](#) (Bruce's Fingers: BF28)

Rhodri Davies (harp), Mark Wastell (cello), Simon H Fell (bass).

[IST: Ghost Notes](#) (Bruce's Fingers: BF28)

Rhodri Davies (harp), Mark Wastell (cello), Simon H Fell (bass)

[Italian Instabile Orchestra: Italian Instabile Festival](#) (Leo: CDLR262/263)

Carlo Actis Dato (reeds), Luca Calabrese (trumpet), Daniele Cavallanti (reeds), Eugenio Colombo (reeds), Paolo Daamiani (cello, bass), Renato Geremia (various), Martin Mayes (French horn), Guido Mazzon (trumpet), Vincenzo Mazzone (drums), Pino Minafra (trumpet), Umberto Petrin (piano), Enrico Rava (trumpet), Lauro Rossi (trombone), Giancarlo Schiaffini (brass instruments, electronics), Mario Schiano (reeds, voice), Bruno Tommaso (bass), Tiziano Tononi (percussion), Sebi Tramontana (trombone, electronics), Gianluigi Trovessi (reeds).

[Ivanovich: Solo Guitar](#) (Amish Records: ami011)

Chuck Johnson (guitars)

[Chris Jonas: The Sun Spits Cherries](#) (Hopscotch: Hop4)

Chris Jonas (soprano sax), Joe Fiedler (tenor trombone), Chris Washburne (bass trombone), Andrew Barker (percussion)

[Kahn, Jason: Drums and Metals](#) (Cut: CUT003)

Jason Kahn (percussion)

[Kaiser, Jeff & Ernesto Diaz-Infante: Pith Balls and Inclined Planes](#) (Pfmentum: CD005)

Jeff Kaiser (trumpet, flugelhorn, electronics, voice), Ernesto Diaz-Infante (guitar, voice)

[Kang/van der Schyff/Houle: Pieces of Time](#) (Spool: SPL104)

Eyvind Kang (violin), Francois Houle (clarinet), Dylan van der Schyff (drums)

[Karayorgis, Pandelis: Heart and Sack](#) (Leo Lab: CD048)

Pandelis Karayorgis (piano), Nate McBride (bass), Randy Peterson (drums).

[Karayorgis, Pandelis: Blood Ballad](#) (Leo: CDLR325)

Pandelis Karayorgis (piano), Nate McBride (bass), Randy Peterson (drums) .

[Kaufmann, Achim: Double Exposure](#) (Leo Records: CDLR289)

Michael Moore (reeds), John Schroder (guitar), John Hollenbeck (drums), Achim Kaufmann (piano)

[Kelley, Greg: Trumpet](#) (Meniscus: MNSCS009)

Greg Kelley (trumpet)

[Kennel, Hans and John Wolf Brennan: Pipelines](#) (Leo Records: CDLR292)

Hans Kennel (trumpet, alphorn), John Wolf Brennan (pipe organ), Marc Unternahrer (tuba)

[Kimmig, Harald: Im Freien](#) (Hybrid CD15)

Harald Kimmig (violin)

[Klapper/Ulher/Morgenstern: Momentaufnahmen](#) (Nur Nicht Nur: CD1001030)

Martin Klapper (toys, electronics), Birgit Ulher (trumpet), Jurgen Morgenstern (bass, voice)

[Kristoff K Roll & Xavier Charles: La Piece](#) (Potlatch: HO2)

Jean-Christophe Camps (electroacoustic devices), Carole Rieussec (electroacoustic devices), Xavier Charles (clarinet)

[Henry Kuntz: One One & One](#) (Hummingbird CD2/3)

Henry Kuntz (reeds), Don Marvel (electronics)

[Kyhl, Christian and Peter Friis Nielsen: Ping Pong](#) (Av-Art: AACD1007/1008)

Christian Kyhl (reeds), Peter Friis Nielsen (bass guitar)

[Kucan, Vlatko: Live at Palo-Palo](#) (True Muze: TUMUCD9803)

Vlatko Kucan (reeds), Tomasz Stanko (trumpet), Michael Danner (trombone, tuba), Jay Oliver (bass), Bill Elgart (drums)

[Lansky, Paul: Conversation Pieces](#) (Bridge: BRIDGE9083)
Lansky (piano, synths, composition).

[Lantner, Steve and Mat Maneri: Reaching](#) (Leo Lab: CD062)
Steve Lantner (pianos), Mat Maneri (violin).

[Lantner/Maneri/Morris: Voices Lowered](#) (Leo: CDLR317)
Steve Lantner (piano), Joe Maneri (reeds), Joe Morris (guitar)

[Larner/Hikage/Gelb: Indistancing](#) (Leo Lab : CD055)
Brett Larner (koto), Shoko Hikage (koto), Philip Gelb (shakuhachi)

[LePage, Robert & Martin Tetreault: Callas: La Diva et Le Vivyle](#) (Ambiances Magnetiques: AM059CD)
Robert M Lepage (clarinet), Martin Tetreault (turntables)

[Leandre, Joelle: The Joelle Leandre Project](#) (Leo: CDLR287)
Joelle Leandre (bass), Marilyn Crispell (piano), Paul Lovens (drums), Richard Teitelbaum (electronics), Carlos Zingazo (violin)

[Leandre, Joelle and Sebi Tramontana: E'Vero](#) (Leo: CDLR275)
Joelle Leandre (bass, voice), Sebi Tramontana (trombone)

[Leandre, Joelle and Danielle Roger: Tricotage](#) (Ambiances Magnetiques: AM078CD)
Joelle Leandre (bass, voice), Danielle P Roger (percussion)

[Leandre, Joelle & Giorgio Occhipinti: Incandescences](#) (Tonesetters: TS007)
Joelle Leandre (bass), Giorgio Occhipinti (piano)

[LEGO: Kneel Down like a Saint Gorilla and Stop](#) (2:13 Music: CD003)
The London Electric Guitar Orchestra (guitars and compositions).

[Leimgruber, Urs: Blue Log](#) (For4Ears: CDNR1137)
Urs Leimgruber (saxophones)

[Leimgruber/Crispell/Leandre/Hauser: Quartet Noir](#) (Les Disques Victo: cd067)
Urs Leimgruber (saxophones), Marilyn Crispell (piano), Joelle Leandre (bass), Fritz Hauser (drums).

[LePage, Robert and Martin Tetreault: Callas: La Diva et le Vinyle](#) (Ambiances Magnetiques:AM059CD)
Robert M LePage (clarinet), Martin Tetreault (turntables). - *SORRY - this file is unavailable!*

[Libera Società di Improvvasazione: Al Mâlaiko Noskçma](#) (Leo Lab: CD050)
Antonella Talamonti (direction), Vincenzo Appolloni, Alberto Berettini, Alessandro Campioni, Sandra Coronei, Patrizia De Ruvo, Daniela D'Ottavi, Manuela Giovannelli, Xavier Rebut, Fili= Sotiraki, Lucia Staccone, Antonella Talamonti, Piergiorgio Terzi (all voices).

[London Improvisors Orchestra: Proceedings](#) (Leo: CDLR279)
Steve Beresford, Kaffe Matthews, Evan Parker, Dave Tucker, Caroline Kraabel, Simon H Fell, Phillip Wachsmann, Rhodri Davies, Chris Burn and Adam Bohman (compositions)

[Lopez, Ramon: Eleven Drums Songs](#) (Leo Lab: CD044)
Ramon Lopez (percussion).

[Lopez, Ramon: Songs of the Spanish Civil War](#) (Leo: CDLR299)
Daunik Lazro (saxphones), Thierry Madiot (bass trombone), Paul Rogers (bass), Benat Achiary (voice), Ramon Lopez (drums) - *SORRY - this file is unavailable!*

[Love Cry Want: Love Cry Want](#) (Newjazz.com: NJC001)
Nicholas (guitar), Joe Gallivan (perc, keyboards), Jimmy Molneiri (perc), Larry Young (organ).

[Locatelli & Braidà: Diciannove Calefazioni](#) (Takla: TAKLA2)
Giancarlo Locatelli (clarinets), Alberto Braidà (piano)

[Lussier, Rene: Chronicle of a Genocide Foretold](#) (Ambiances Magnetiques)
Rene Lussier (compositions).

[Lussier, Rene and Martin Tetreault: Dur Noyau Dur](#) (Ambiances Magnetiques)

Rene Lussier (guitar), Martin Tetreault (electronics).

[Maltese, Stefano, and Open Sound Ensemble: Living Alive](#) (Leo: CDLR265)

Stefano Maltese (reeds), Arkady Shilkloper (French horn, flugelhorn), Sophia Dominacich (piano), Paul Rogers (bass), Antonio Moncada (percussion), Gioconda Cilio (voice, percussion).

[Maneri, Joe: The Trio Concerts](#) (Leo: CDLR307/308)

Joe Maneri (reeds, piano), Mat Maneri (violina, viola), Randy Peterson

[Maroney, Denman: Hyperpiano](#) (Mon\$ey Music: No number)

Denman Maroney (piano)

[Marraffa, Edoardo: Solo](#) (Bassesferec: BS005)

Edoardo Marraffa (tenor sax)

[Marsh/Franklin/Crowther: Shell of Certainty](#) (Visionlogic: VLG101)

Steve Franklin (keyboards), Tim Crowther (guitar, guitar synth), Tony March (drums).

[Martini, Fabio: Circadiana Clangori](#) (Leo Lab: CD045)

Fabio Martini (clarinet), Giancarlo Locatelli (clarinet), Massimo Falascone (saxophones), Sergio Notari (English horn), Marina Ciccarelli (trombone), Luca Venitucci (accordion), Angelo Avogadri (guitar), Luciano Margorani (guitar), Tito Mangialajo Rantzer (bass), Filippo Monico (percussion), Fabrisio Spera (percussion).

[Martini, Fabio: Intrio](#) (Takla: TAKLA3)

Fabio Martini (clarinets), Tito Mangialajo Rantzer (bass, first half only), Domenico Sciajno (bass, electronics, second half only), Carlo Virzi (percussion, first half only), Ruggero Radaele (percussion, second half only)

[Master Class: Mindgarden](#) (Unsound Automatic: UACD009)

Derrug Claptona (guitar, vocals), Fred Bansen (keyboards, vocals), Bo "Porn" Craddock (drums), Baru Harrison (bass), Dawn craddock (keyboards)

[Mazzone, Vincenzo: Ping Pong](#) (Leo Lab : CD056)

Vincenzo Mazzone (percussion), Antonio Di Lorenzo (percussion), Lello Patruno (percussion), Giuseppe Tria (percussion), Giuseppe Berardi (percussion), Maurizio De Robertis (percussion), Ivan Mancinelli (percussion), Domenico De Palma (percussion), Simone Salvatorelli (percussion), Daniele Patumi (bass), Carlo Actis Dato (reeds), Giorgio Occhipinti (piano), Sandro Satta (alto sax), Pino Minafra (trumpet), Lauro Rossi (trombone).

[Mehta, Rajesh: Orka](#) (Hatology: 524)

Rajesh Mehta (trumpet), Paul Lovens (percussion)

[Mehta, Rajesh: Window Shopping](#) (True Muze: TUMUCD9802)

Rajesh Mehta (trumpet), Felicity Provan (trumpet, voice), Alan Purves (drums), Paul Southamer (cello), Tom Fryer (guitar)

[Middletown Creative Orchestra: 10.6.97](#)(Newsonic: 6)

Jenna Alden (tenor sax), Josh Blair (percussion), Dan Gilbert (electric guitar), Jesse Kudler (theremin), Rachel Thompson (viola), David Novak (bassoon, melodica), Johnathon Zorn (bass), Seth Dillinger (electric guitar), Jackson More (alto saxophone), Eric Ronick (melodica, piano), Anne Hege (flute), James Fei (bass clarinet), Seth Misterka (alto sax), Rafael Cohen (oboe), Peter Cafarella (accordion), Karen Correa (viola).

[Middletown Creative Orchestra: 4.11.98 and 4.30.98](#)(Newsonic: 9)

Seth Dellinger (voice, objects), Edward Kasperek (percussion), Richard McGhee (soprano sax), Seth Misterka (alto sax), Jackson Moore (reeds), Jessica Pavone (viola), Amanda Youngman (clarinet), Johnathon Zorn (bass, accordion, slide whistle), Jenna Alden (tenor saxophone), Josh Blair (percussion), Peter Cafarella (accordion, piano), Josephine Conover (viola), Dan Gartner (voice, piano), Anne Hedge (voice), Chris Jonas (tenor saxophone), Jesse Kudler (electric guitar, objects), Juliana Mastronunzio (voice), Phloyd Starploi (trombone), Yosuke Oshima (oboe).

[Reviewed with "10.6.97"]

[Middletown Creative Orchestra: Crystal Lake](#)(Newsonic: 12)

Marc Burns (keyboards), Peter Cafarella (accordion), Rafael Cohen (oboe), Seth Dillinger (bass), Van Green (bass), Edward Kasperek (percussion), Jesse Kudler (theremin), Chris Matthay (trumpet), Richard McGhee (reeds), Seth Misterka (alto sax), Jackson Moore (reeds), Jessica Pavone (violin), Phloyd Starpoli (trombone), Dortha Willets (dulcimer), Johnathon Zorn (viola).

[Reviewed with "10.6.97"]

[Middletown Three: Nine Compositions](#)(Newsonic: 6)

Seth Misterka (alto sax, electric guitar), Jackson Moore (reeds), Jonathon Zorn (bass)

[Minton, Phil: A Doughnut in Both Hands](#) (Emanem: 4026)

Phil Minton (voice)

[Misere et Cordes: Au Ni Kita](#) (Potlatch: P101)

Pascal Battus, Emmanuel Petit, Dominique Repecaud, Camel Zekri (guitars)

[Misterka, Seth: MOH](#) (Newsonic: 17)

Seth Misterka (saxophones, samples)

[Modisti: Signoise](#)(CEDi: 8)

Belma Martin (voice, wind objects), Pedro Lopez (objects, sampling, tapes).

[Mota, Manuel: For Your Protection Why Don't You Just Paint Yourself Real Good Like An Indian](#)

(Headlights: H04)

Manuel Mota (guitar), Margarida Garcia (bass)

[Nabatov, Simon: Nature Morte](#) (Leo: CDLR310)

Phil Minton (voice), Frank Gratkowski (reeds), Nils Wogram (trombone), Simon Nabatov (piano)

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[Namchylak/Hirsch/Bott: Temenos \(Soundtrack\)](#) (Leo: CDLR303)

Sainkho Namchylak (voice), Shelley Hirsch (voice), Catherine Bott (voice), Nina Danino (spoken word), Pavio Besnosiuk (vielles), Sandra des Neves Pereira (voice)

[Natraj: Deccan Dance](#) (Galloping Goat: GGCD-3424)

Phil Scarff (saxophones), Mat Maneri (electric violin), Michael Rivard (bass), Jerry Leake (percussion), Bertram Lehmann (percussion)

[Neumann, Andrew: No Fly Zone](#) (Sublingual: SLR003)

Andrew Neumann (synthesisers, sampler)

[Niblock, Phil: Music by Phil Niblock](#) (Experimental Intermedia Foundation: XI111)

Soldier String Quartet, Eberhard Blum (bass flute), Susan Stenger (flute)

[Noble, Williams, Marshall: Flathead Reunion](#) (Leo: CDLR247)

Steve Noble (drums, turntables), Davey Williams (guitar), Oren Marshall (electric tuba).

[Nodwell, Mark: \(Co\)incidents](#) (Songlines: SGL1527-2)

Mark Nodwell (soprano sax), Eyvind Kang (viola), Francois Houle (clarinet), Khabu Doug Young (guitar), Masayoshi John Anzai (bass), Jack Kaham (drums) - *SORRY - this file is unavailable!*

[Norton, Kevin: Knots](#) (Music and Arts: CD1033)

Bob DeBellis (reeds), David Bindman (reeds), David Krakauer (clarinet), Tomas Ulrich (cello), Joe Fonda (bass), Kevin Norton (drums)

[Norton, Kevin: For Guy Debord \(in Nine Events\)](#) (Barking Hoop: BKH001)

Anthony Braxton (reeds), Bob DeBellis (reeds), David Bindman (reeds), Tomas Ulrich (cello), Joe Fonda (bass), Kevin Norton (drums)

[Not Missing Drums Project: Urban Voices](#) (Leo Lab: PPCD001)

Joelle Leandre, Uschi Brunning and big band.

[Not Missing Drums Project: Offline Adventures](#) (Leo Lab : CD057)

Margarete Huber (voice), Magreth Kammerer (voice), Alex Nowitz (voice), Wolfgang Ritthof (voice), Ernst-Ludwig Petrowsky (reeds), Joachim Gies (reeds), Jurgen Kupke (clarinet), Rudi Mahall (bass clarinet), Elisabeth Bohm-Christl (bassoon, double bassoon), Axel Dörner (trumpet), Thomas Wiedermann (trombone), Aleks Kolkowski (violin), Wolfram Korr (violin), Thomas Bohm-Christl (cello), Gesine Conrad (cello), Matthias Bauer (bass, voice), Gerold Genssler (bass), Hartwig Nickola (bass), Bardo Hennig (piano), Andrea Neumann (piano).

[One King Poets: Major Wood](#) (Fragile Noise: CD99FN50)

Mike Walter (saxophones), Paul Shearsmith (trumpet, trombone), Giles Perring (electric guitar), Jerry Bird (bass), Robin Musgrove (drums)

[Opeye: Moss 'Comes Silk](#) (Hummingbird: CD1)

Henry Kuntz, Ben Lindgren, Brian Godchaux, Esten Lindgren, John Kuntz (all various instruments)

[Osso Exotico: Church Organ Works](#) (Sonoris: SON-03)

Patrician Machas, David Maranha, Andre Maranha (organ), Bernardo Devlin (voice, one track only)

[Pago Libre](#) (L & R: CDLR45105)

Tscho Theissing (violin), Arkady Shilkloper (french horn), John Wolf Brennan (piano), Daniele Patumi (bass)

[Pago Libre: Wake Up Call](#) (Leo: CDLR272)

Tscho Theissing (violin, voice), Arkady Shilkloper (french horn, flugelhorn), John Wolf Brennan (piano, melodica), Daniele Patumi (bass)

[Panhuysen, Paul: Partitas for Long Strings](#) (Experimental Intermedia Foundation: XI122)

Paul Panhuysen (long strings)

[Parker, Evan: Waterloo, 1985](#) (Emanem : 4035)

Evan Parker (saxophones), Steve Beresford (piano), John Edwards (bass), Louis Moholo (percussion).

[Parker, Evan: Foxes Fox](#) (Emanem : 4030)

Evan Parker (saxophones), Paul Rutherford (trombone), Hans Schneider (bass), Paul Lytton (drums).

[Parker, Evan: The Ayes Have It](#) (Emanem: 4055)

Evan Parker (saxophones), Paul Rogers (bass), Jamie Muir (percussion), Wolter Wierbos (trombone), Mark Sanders (percussion)

[Parker, Evan: 2 x 3 = 5](#) (Leo: CDLR305)

Evan Parker (saxophones), Alex von Schlippenbach (piano), Barry Guy (bass), Paul Lovens (drums), Paul Lytton (drums)

[Parker, Evan and Ned Rothenberg: Monkey Puzzle](#) (Leo: CDLR247)

Evan Parker (saxophones), Ned Rothenberg (saxophones). - *SORRY - this file is unavailable!*

[Parker, Evan and Keith Rowe: Dark Rags](#) (Potlatch: P200)

Evan Parker (tenor sax), Keith Rowe (guitar)

[Parker, Evan and Richard Nunns: Rangigua](#) (Leo: CDLR314)

Evan Parker (saxophones), Richard Nunns (taonga puoro)

[Parker, Evan and Patrick Scheyder](#) (Leo: CDLR326)

Evan Parker (saxophones), Patrick Scheyder (piano)

[Parker/Guy/Lytton/Crispell: After Appleby](#) (Leo: CDLR283/284)

Evan Parker (saxophones), Barry Guy (bass), Paul Lytton (drums), Marilyn Crispell (piano)

[Pavone, Mario: Remembering Thomas](#) (Knitting Factory Records: KFR257)

Mario Pavone (bass), Peter Madsen (piano), Matt Wilson (drums).

[Perelman, Ivo: Brazilian Watercolour](#) (Leo: CDLR266)

Ivo Perelman (tenor sax, recorder, piano), Matthew Shipp (piano), Rashied Ali (drums), Guilherme Franco (percussion, wooden flute), Cyro Baptista (percussion, wooden flute).

[Perelman, Ivo: Sieiro](#) (Leo: CDLR271)

Ivo Perelman (tenor sax, tenor trombone), Tomas Ulrich (cello), Dominic Duval (bass), Jay Rosen (drums)

[Perelman, Ivo and Jay Rosen: The Hammer](#) (Leo: CDLR286)

Ivo Perelman (saxophones), Jay Rosen (drums)

[Perelman, Ivo: The Eye Listens](#) (Boxholder: BXH012)

Ivo Perelman (reeds), Wilbur Morris (bass), Michael Wimberley (drums)

[Perelman, Ivo: The Seven Energies of the Universe](#) (Leo Lab: CD309)

Ivo Perelman (tenor sax), Joseph Scianni (piano), Jay Rosen (drums)

[Petit, Didier: NOHC on the Road](#) (Leo Records: CD065)

Daunik Lazro (saxophones), Denis Colin (bass clarinet), Michael Nick (violin), Didier Petit (cello, voice)

[Phantom City: Shiva Recoil: Live/Unlive](#) (Virgin: AMBT21)

Paul Schutze (keyboards and tapes), Raoul Björkenheim (guitar), Toshinori Kondo (trumpet), Alex Buess (bass clarinet), Bill Laswell (bass), Dirk Wachtelaer (drums).

[Plimley, Paul & Trichy Sankaran: Ivory Ganesh meets Doctor Drums](#) (Songlines: SGL1523-2)

Paul Plimley (piano), Trichy Sankaran (mrdangam, kanjira)

[Poison Cabinet: Dark Embrace](#) (General Ear: GE4)

Louise Petts (sax, voice, synth), David Petts (sax, synth).

[Ponga](#) (Loosegroove: Igoo18-2)

Wayne Horvitz (keyboards), Bobby Previte (drums), Skerik (sax), Dave Palmer (keyboards)

[Poulsen/Nielsen/Moholo: Copenhagen](#) (Av-Art: AACD1010)

Hasse Poulsen (guitar), Peter Friis Nielsen (bass), Louis Moholo (drums)

[Praxis: Transmutation Live](#) (Douglas: ADC5)

Bill Laswell (bass), Buckethead (guitar), Brain (drums) with DJs.

[Prevost, Eddie: Continuum +](#) (Matchless: MRCD07)

Larry Stabbins (saxophones), Vervan Weston (piano), Marcio Mattos (bass), Eddie Prevost (drums).

[Prevost, Eddie and Vervan Weston: Concert, V](#) (Matchless: MRCD37)

Vervan Weston (piano), Eddie Prevost (drums).

[Protruberance: Treated and Released](#) (Zerx: 019)

Paul Pulaski (guitar), Mark Weaver (tuba), Dave Wayne (drums)

[PUT: Umlaut](#) (Nur Nicht Nur: CD1000425)

Birgit Ulher (trumpet), Ulrich Phillipp (bass), Roger Turner (percussion)

[Radioactive Sparrow: We're Breaking Through](#) (Unsound Automatic: UACD004)

Bill Bargefoot, Tony Gage, Richard Bowers, Chris Hartford (guitars, vocals, keyboards etc)

[Radioactive Sparrow: Live and Let Off](#) (Unsound Automatic: UACD005)

Bill Bargefoot, Tony Gage, Richard Bowers (guitars, vocals, keyboards, drum machines etc)

[Remote Viewers, The: Obliques before Pale Skin](#) (Leo Lab: CD063)

Adrian Northover (saxes), Louise Petts (sax, voice, synth), David Petts (sax, synth).

[Remote Viewers, The: Low Shapes in Dark Heat](#) (Leo Lab: CD049)

Adrian Northover (saxes), Louise Petts (sax, voice, synth), David Petts (sax, synth).

[Remote Viewers, The: Persuasive With Aliens](#) (Leo Lab: CD067)

Adrian Northover (soprano sax), Louise Petts (alto sax, electronics, voice), David Petts (tenor sax, electronics)

[Remote Viewers, The: Stranded Depots](#) (Leo Lab: CD076)

David Petts (tenor sax, keyboards), Louise Petts (voice, alto sax, theremin), Adrian Northover (saxophones)

[Repeat: Temporary Contemporary](#) (For4ears: CD1032)

Toshimaru Nakamura (no-input mixing board, sampling), Jason Kahn (percussion, sampling)

[Re-sound](#) (Monash: no number)

Compositions by John Cage, Brendan Colbert, Thomas Reiner, Ken Murray, Harvey Solberger and Paul Moulattlet

[Riley, Howard: Overground](#) (Emanem: 4054)

Howard Riley (piano), Barry Guy (bass), Tony Oxley (percussion, electronics) .

[Robair, Gino: Buddy Systems](#) (Meniscus: 003)

Gino Robair (percussion), Dave Barrett (reeds), Myles Boisen (guitars, CD player), John Butcher (sax), Carla Kihlstedt (violin), Tim Perkis (electronics), Dan Plonsey (clarinet), LaDonna Smith (strings, voice), Matthew Sperry (bass), Oluyemi Thomas (reeds, percussion), Otomo Yoshihide (turntables, CD players)

[Robertson, Herb: Music for Long Attention Spans](#) (Leo: CDLR315)

Herb Robertson (trumpet, little instruments), Steve Swell (trombone), Bob Hovey (trombone, percussion, voice), Hans Tammen (guitar), Chris Lough (bass), Tom Sayek (drums)

[Rohstoff: Fullmoonimprovisations 1999/2000 Tryllehaven](#) (Intuitive: IRCD002)

Felix Becker, Ivan Vincze, Carl Bergstrom-Nielsen, Laszlo Bela Kovacs, Patricia Roncayolo, Niseema Munk-Madsen, Daniel Briegleb, Janos Veto Lavman, Kaszon Kovacz, Mikkel Hornnes, Ervin Janos Lazar, Thomas Bredsdorff, Ildiko Ungvary (instrumentation not specified)

[Rottor: The First Full Turn](#) (Emanem: 4026)

Paul Rutherford (trombone, voice), Julie Tippett (voice, thumb piano), Keith Tippett (piano, bells, maracas), Paul Rogers (bass)

[Russell, John and Roger Turner: The Second Sky](#) (Emanem: 4058)

John Russell (guitar), Roger Turner (percussion)

[Russell/Altena/Day: The Fairly Young Bean](#) (Emanem: 4036)

John Russell (guitar), Maarten Altena (cello, bass), Terry Day (percussion, voice)

[Sabatini, Mirko: -28+Alieni](#) (Ambiances Magnetiques: AM080CD)

Mirko Sabatini (percussion)

[Saturnalia: Jonathon LaMaster's Saturnalia](#) (Sublingual: SLR002)

Jonathon LaMaster (violin, guitar, vocals), Michael Bullock (bass), James Coleman (theremin), Creed Drew (guitar), Keiko Higuchi (vocals, trombone, radio), Greg Kelly (trumpet, one track only), Bill T Miller (sampler), Tatsuya Nakatani (drums), Kory Sylvester (electronic drums, one track only), Vic Rawlings (cello, banjo, sarangi), Robin Amos (synth), Larry Coar (drums), Michael Knobloch (drums), Steve LaMaster (alto sax, one track only), Roger Miller (guitar), Zak Sherzad (reeds), Elliott Sharp (guitar, one track only)

[Saturnalia String Trio with Daniel Carter](#) (Sublingual: SLRV1001)

Jonathan LaMaster (violin), Vic Rawlings (cello, sarangi), Mike Bullock (bass), Daniel Carter (reeds, flute, trumpet), Andrew Barker (drums, one track only)

[Shooting Stars and Traffic Lights](#) (L & R: CDLR45090)

Tscho Theissing (violin), John Voirol (saxophones, synthophone), John Wolf Brennan (piano), Daniele Patumi (bass), Alex Cline (drums)

[Siwula/Cherry/Arnal: Badlands](#) (Cadence: CJR1120)

Blaise Siwula (alto sax), Vattel Cherry (bass), Jeff Arnal (drums)

[Smith, Roger: Extended Plays](#) (Emanem: 4032)

Roger Smith (guitar), Neil Matcalfe (flute, one track only)

[Sound Kitchen: Pass me the Wine, Please](#) (Av-Art: AACD1011)

Jari Hongisto (trombone, percussion), Hasse Poulsen (guitar), Teppo Hauta-aho (bass)

[Sound of Choice: Dynamics](#) (Av-Art: AACD1006)

Hasse Poulsen (guitars, electronics, voice), Lars Juul (percussion, voice), Fredrik Lundin (reeds, electronics), Lars Møller (reeds, voice), Thomas Sandberg (vibes, percussion, voice).

[Speake, Martin and Nikki Iles: The Tan Tien](#) (FMR: CD51V0898)

Martin Speake (alto saxophone), Nikki Iles (piano).

[Speed, Chris: Deviantics](#) (Songlines: SGL1524-2)

Chris Speed (tenor sax, clarinet), Cuong Vu (trumpet), Skuli Sverrisson (bass), Jim Black (drums, melodica)

[Spontaneous Music Ensemble: Low Profile](#) (Emanem: 4031)

John Stevens (percussion, cornet, voice), Nigel Coombes (violin), Colin Wood (cello), Roger Smith (guitar)

[Statements Quintet: The Cat's Pyjamas](#) (Leo Lab : CD054)

Ursel Schlict (piano), Hans Tammen (guitar), Dominic Duval (bass), Jay Rosen (drums, percussion), Christoph Irmr (violin)

[Studer, Fredy: Duos 3-13](#) (For4Ears: CD1034)

Fredy Studer (percussion), Jin Hi Kim (komungo), Joelle Leandre (bass), Dorothea Schurch (voice, saw)

[Sun Ra Arkestra meets Salah Ragab in Egypt](#) (Golden Years of New Jazz : GY1)

Sun Ra Arkestra, Cairo Jazz Band and Cairo Free Jazz Ensemble, featuring a cast of (almost) thousands.

[Sun Ra: Live at Praxis '84](#) (Leo Records: GY5/6)

Sun Ra (keys), Ronnie Brown (trumpet), Marshall Allen (reeds), Elsie Omo (reeds), John Gilmore (reeds), Danny Ray Thompson (reeds), James Jackson (reeds), Rollo Redford (bass), Matthew Brown (conga), Don Mamford (drums), Salah Ragab (conga) [NB most musicians play numerous instruments]

[Szemo, Tibor: The Other Shore](#) (Leo: CDLR 281)

Tibor Szemo (compositions, electronics, flute).

[Szemo, Tibor: Snapshot from the Island](#) (Leo: CDLR 277)

Tibor Szemo (compositions, electronics, flute).

[Szemo, Tibor: Invisible Story](#) (Leo: CDLR312)

Tibor Szemo (narration, electronics, composition), The Gordian Knot Company.

[Takase, Aki: Le Cahier du Bal](#) (Leo: CDLR319)

Aki Takase (piano) .

[Hans Tammen: Endangered Guitar](#) (Nur/Nicht/Nur: No number)

Hans Tammen (guitar)

[Tammen, Hans and Dominic Duval: The Road Bends Here](#) (Leo Lab: CD072)

Hans Tammen (guitar), Dominic Duval (bass)

[Tanguay, Pierre: La Musique de mon Disque](#) (Ambiances Magnetiques: AM079CD)

Pierre Tanguay (composition, objects)

[Tchicai, John and Giancarlo Nicolai: The Giancarlo Nicolai Trio with John Tchicai](#) (Leo: CDLR164)

John Tchicai (tenor and soprano saxes, voice), Giancarlo Nicolai (guitar), Thomas Durst (bass), Ueli Müller (drums).

[Toop, David and Max Eastley: New and Rediscovered Musical Instruments](#) (Virgin: CDOVD478)

Max Eastley (sculptures), David Toop (voice, guitar, chordophone, flute), Frank Perry (percussion), Paul Burwell (percussion), Brian Eno (bass guitar), Hugh Davies (grill harp).

[Tremblay, Jaques: Alibi](#) (Diffusion i Media: IMED9841)

Jacques Tremblay (electronics).

[Trio Chroch: Live at Dexter](#) (Av-Art: AACD1009)

Christoffer Sten Moller (piano, keyboards, trumpet, voice), Robert Cole Rizzi (guitar, electronics, percussion, voice), Chano Olskaer (percussion, voice)

[Trio Nuevo Finlandia: Ha! What's Going On?](#) (Leo Lab: CD046)

Baron Paakkunainen (flute, alto flute, soprano sax, tenor sax, baritone sax), Eero Ojanen (piano), Teppo Hauta-Aho- (bass, cello, siren).

[Trio X: Rapture](#) (Cadence: CJR1106)

Joe McPhee (sax), Jay Rosen (drums), Dominic Duval (bass, electronics), Rosi Hertlein (violin, voice).

[Turner, Matt: The Mouse That Roared](#) (Meniscus: MNSCS002)

Matt Turner (cello)

[Turner, Matt: Crushed Smoke](#) (Tautology: 014)

Matt Turner (cello)

[Ullman, Gebhard: Ta Lam Zehn](#) (Leo Records: CDLR290)

Hinrich Beermann (sax), Daniel Erdmann (sax), Thomas Klemm (sax), Jurgen Kupke (clarinet), Joachim Litty (reeds), Theo Nabicht (reeds), Heiner Reinhart (bass clarinet), Volker Schlott (reeds), Gebhard Ullmann (reeds), Hans Hassler (accordeon)

[Van Hove, Fred: Flux](#) (Potlatch : P2398)

Fred Van Hove (piano).

[Various Artists: The Unsound Automatic Starter Kit](#) (Unsound Automatic: UACD001)

Tracks by Chris Hartford, Livestock, Andrea Rocca vs Bruco Lava, Radioactive Sparrow, Homo-Genetic Arsonist, Tony Gage, Richard Bowers, Simply Keys

[Various Artists: The Kakutopia Annual Report](#) (Unsound Automatic: UACD015)

[Various Artists: Bowed and Popped](#) (Nur/Nicht/Nur: no number)

Tracks by Michael Vorfeld, Stephan Froleyks, Hans Tammen.

[Various Artists: Rubbed and Blown](#) (Nur/Nicht/Nur: no number)

Tracks by Claus von Bebbber, RoN Schmidt, Paul Hubweber.

[Various Artists: Danish Intuitive Music](#) (Intuitive: IRCD003)

Compositions by Jorgen Lekfeld, Carl Bergstrom-Nielsen, Ivan Eugen Vincze, Jorgen Plaetner

[Various Artists: Boston Underbelly](#) (Sublingual: SLR001)

Andrew Neumann, Saturnalia, Neptune, Mile Wide, Sigmoid Flexure, BTM/KOF, BTM/Orgy of Noise, Binary System, Thurston Moore.

[Vertrek Ensemble with Derek Bailey: Departures](#) (Volatile: VCD002)

Derek Bailey (guitar), Vadim Budman (guitar, cornet, reed cornet), Ron de Jong (percussion) .

[Vertrek Ensemble with Eugene Chadbourne: Dim Sum, Dodgers and Dangerous Nights](#) (Volatile: VCD003)

Eugene Chadbourne (guitar, banjo, voice), Vadim Budman (guitar, cornet, reed cornet, wooden flute, harmonica), Ron de Jong (percussion) .

[VHF: Extracts](#) (Erstwhile: 001)

Graham Halliwell (alto sax, percussion), Simon H Fell (double bass), Simon Vincent (drums, tone generator).

[Vitriol: Randonee 0.06](#) (Sir Records: SIRR2001MCD)

Paolo Raposo, Carlos Santos (composition) .

[Ware, Ed](#) (Ed Ware: 4037)

Joe Fiedler (trombone), Jerome Harris (guitar), Pete McCann (guitar), Edward Ware (drums)

[Wall, John: Fractuur](#) (Utterpsalm: CD3)

John Wall (sampler, compositions), with many improvisers including John Edwards (bass).

[Weber, Mark: Beauteous Everlasting](#) (Zerx: 004)

Mark Weber (spoken word, melodica, percussion), Patti Littlefield (voice), Tom Guralnick (tenor sax), Tim Zannes (tenor sax), Bill Plake (tenor sax), Stefan Dill (guitar), Lou Morales (percussion), Justine Flynn (French horn), Jon Baldwin (cornet, percussion), Jefferson Voorhees (percussion), Mark Weaver (tuba), J A Deane (trombone, steel guitar, electronics), Lisa Polisar (flute), Alicia Ultan (viola), Courtney Smith (celtic harp), Craig Ochikubo (keys), Anders Swanson (bass, violin), Chris Garcia (drums), Eileen Sullivan (violin), Bonnie Renfro (violin), Pam Morden (violin), Lewis Winn (guitar), Chris Allen (vibes).

[Weber, Mark: Time Zone Differential](#) (Zerx : 007)

Mark Weber (spoken word), Michael Vlatkovich (trombone, percussion), Bill Plake (tenor sax), Alex Cline (percussion), Nels Cline (guitar), William Roper (tuba, percussion), Chris Garcia (percussion), Vinny Golia (baritone sax, clarinet), David Parlato (bass), Craig Ochikubo (keys), Anders Swanson (bass, violin), Rob Blakeslee (trumpet, flugelhorn), Ken Filiano (bass), Billy Mintz (drums), Gerald Locklin (spoken word, one track only), Wayne Peet (organ, one track only), Gretchen Parlato (voice, one track only).

[Weston/Edwards/Sanders: Mercury Concert](#) (Emanem : 4028)

Veryan Weston (piano), John Edwards (bass), Mark Sanders (drums)

[W.O.O. Revelator: Taking the Long View](#) (W.O.O. Direct: no number)

Bonnie Kane (sax, flute), Chris Forsyth (guitar), Ray Sage (drums).

[Wodrascka, Christine & Ramon Lopez: Aux Portes du Matin](#) (Leo: CDLR318)

Christine Wodrascka (piano), Ramon Lopez (drums) .

[Yaun, Keith: Countersink](#) (Leo Lab: CD047)

Keith Yaun (guitar), Mat Maneri (electric violin), Nathan Cook (tenor sax), John Lockwood (bass), Johnny McLellan (drums).

[Yaun, Keith: Improvisations on Messiaen](#) (Boxholder: BXH010)

Keith Yaun (guitar), Bern Nix (guitar), Mat Maneri (violin), Johnny McLellan (drums) .

[Zimmerli, Patrick: Expansion](#) (Songlines: SGL1530-2)

Patrick Zimmerli (tenor sax), Ben Monder (guitar), Stomu Takeishi (bass), Satoshi Takeishi (percussion)

[Zoepf, Joachim: Kollateralschaden](#) (Nur/Nicht/Nur: no number)

Joachim Zoepf (reeds).

[Zorn, John: Masada Het](#) (DIW: DIW-195)

John Zorn (alto sax), Dave Douglas (trumpet), Greg Cohen (bass), Joey Baron (drums).

[Zorn, John: The Classic Guide to Strategy](#) (Tzadik: TZ7305)

John Zorn (reed instruments, game calls etc).

[Zorn, Jonathon: ContraBass](#) (Newsonic: newsonic11)

Jonathon Zorn (bass)

MUSINGS REVIEWS

Alienstalk

(Sargasso: SCD28025)

Ellen Christi (vocals), Claudio Lodati (guitar), Luigi Archetti (guitar), Jan Schlegel (bass)

"Somewhere between Diamanda Galas, King Crimson, Ella Fitzgerald, opera"; living up to one's press releases has never been so difficult (nor so unlikely) as it is for New York perennial Ellen Christi. Here, in the studio with a regular quartet, she sounds relaxed as she leads us through fifteen semi-composed universes ranging in size from five seconds to just shy of ten minutes. These are four Americans virtually unknown in the UK, a risky venture for a small London label.

As a singer, Christi is firmly in the post-jazz camp, cheek-by-jowl with Maggie Nichols, Lauren Newton and Julie Tippetts, mixing a breathy blues base with the full range of experimental techniques, including extensive use of electronic processing. These latter do include a ping-pong delay which gets a little irritating on headphones, but their general use is unobtrusive. As for the Ella reference, it's hard to see where this comes from; not here, where Christi's deep, whispery moan sounds more like Sarah Vaughan's, and her quick-fire scat singing is all her own.

A few of the tracks presented here have more than a couple of words which sound written in advance, and the approach does not seem to suit Christi too well. "Purpose" attempts an ill-advised Laurie Anderson take-off, but being a smart female singer from New York is really all they have in common, and "What is the purpose of mankind/ If mankind cannot live together" doesn't cut the mustard. This record is at its best when words are abandoned, leaving Christi with nothing but her fantastically subtle vocal chords to work with. At those times, Diamanda Galas' name comes up as a contrast rather than a comparison. Where Galas uses her voice as a kind of emotional power tool, going for maximum violence as an inherent value, Christi has a calm delivery even in her most intense moments. Her screams, when they come (which is rarely), seem to have a more formal, a more conventionally musical role to play than Galas' outpourings. One gets the impression that Christi might stop at any moment and change direction, where Galas builds and builds into a relentless and unstoppable avalanche.

Her accompanists are, in a word, excellent. It's hard to pick their contributions apart, and Lodati and Archetti sound stylistically similar and certainly very compatible as they run the whole gamut from nice chords, through near-conventional, jazzy soloing to thoughtful and highly abstract work with preparations. "America" contains some conventionally very beautiful playing, but also the sound of one player using what sounds like a file on the strings. The King Crimson comparison -- which has been made more than once -- comes from the composed sections, which have something of a whiff of Fripp about them, although the latter's insistence on trying to sound like a machine, with all the harm that has done to conventional guitar technique, is abandoned in favour of a more lively approach. Occasionally the distortion pedals come into play -- boys will be boys, after all -- but they keep effects to a minimum most of the time, which suits the setting better. These are clearly two very good players indeed, and anyone with an interest in contemporary electric guitar is advised to check them out. Jan Schlegel makes a minimal but important contribution, and the three together sound as good as any guitar-led trio in the avant garde. Christi must recognise this because, to her credit, she gives them plenty of space to stretch out.

They have found the right metaphor with the concept of an alien language. There is something deliberately weird and wilfully curious about the sounds they make, a self-referential sense of the meanings of their music which only really seems to flourish on the other side of the Atlantic. The sound of keening theremins from 1950s b-movies is evoked on several occasions, as are the longhair textures of the lost days of space-age progressive rock. The record borrows from neither source very heavily -- in the final analysis, it is a no-wave record, pure and simple -- but it conjures a quite breathtaking atmosphere, neither pretentious nor kitschy, neither tuneful nor freeform. Very promising stuff from Sargasso, and from this quartet, who it would be nice to see in the UK doing something about that deplorably low profile.

Richard Cochrane.

Matt Turner: Crushed Smoke

([Tautology](#): 014)

Matt Turner (cello)

Joachim Gies: Whispering Blue

([Leo Lab](#): CD074)

Joachim Gies (reeds)

Brian Allen: Solo Trombone

([Braintone](#): No Number)

Brian Allen (trombone)

Solo recordings are one of those things which can be fantastic or dreadful depending on the approach taken. Some people appear to think that somebody out there wants to listen to an hour of them showing off various techniques or practicing new ones. Not these two: both Gies and Turner have done it before (recording solo, that it), and both choose to turn in CDs full of music rather than practice tapes.

Turner's disk is one of those that just won't stop jumping into your CD player. He characterises it as noise-based, and it certainly uses the extremes of the acoustic cello's sonic possibilities, but the attention to detail here is wonderful and Turner's discipline in sticking to an idea and developing it with care and attention is remarkable. We've heard him in a solo setting before ("[The Mouse That Roared](#)", [on Meniscus](#)) and been impressed by this ability to focus but expressed reservations about a certain, well reservation in his playing. Not so here; the more extreme timbres, and perhaps a more relaxed atmosphere, enable him to really open up.

There are some pieces here which work in part because of the extreme limitations of the palette, like certain paintings done all in shades of blue (Picasso, Kandinsky), or in contiguous areas of clashing colour (Klee). "Smoking Carnivore" is one of these, created mainly from the sound of the bow being scraped too hard and too slowly across the strings. The resulting sound is perhaps similar to but not as radical as Hand Tammen's "Styrofoam", but the very decision to use a cello rather than something more suited to the production of these kinds of sounds allows the instrument's more recognisable timbres to occasionally leak through. The overall effect is something like a brutal modernist painting done on top of something trivially pretty, the palimpsest of Romanticism (if you can pardon the pretentiousness for a moment) peering out from the patina of the contemporary. Nothing could be more postmodern or, frankly, more fun.

At times, Turner reminds this writer of Tammen in other ways, too; his approach to extreme and sometimes blackboard-scrapingly nasty timbres is similarly unflinching. But there are moments of real, if savage, beauty on this record. The two tracks featuring electric cello are a bit less raw and characterful, but they're quite funky and oddly reminiscent of the opening of Gies's solo outing.

Just as Turner sometimes turns to percussive, pulsing structures within which to make things happen, as on the bow-bouncing "Tap", Gies opens with a circular-breathing piece composed on a bed of cyclic key-clicks above which long, trilling notes appear as if by magic. They appear, of course, when Gies increases air-pressure and turns the clicks into notes, but somehow the brain, which is used to hearing rhythms with melodic phrases superimposed over them, hears it that way instead. It's clever and cool and instantly appealing.

Not everything here is so accessible, but it's all of good quality. The music, as the title suggests, is often very quiet and rather subtle, but then so is Turner's supposedly "noise"-based CD. There are differences, though -- big, important differences. Turner and Gies both enjoy extended techniques, but the cellist allows them to inform his musical choices (which is a perfectly valid and, in his case, effective way of proceeding) while Gies gives the impression of being in full control deploying notes slowly and quietly into an enigmatic silence.

There are some technically astounding things on here -- the things Gies can do with a trombone mouthpiece wedged into the neck of a tenor sax must be heard to be believed -- but that's not really the point. As with Turner, weird techniques may be the starting-point for some of these pieces but they certainly aren't the end they aim at. Gies creates music of real vividness, and that's what makes this CD extremely good.

Allen's self-released CD-R may be less high-profile, but it reveals a lesser-known talent who may do bigger things. He's something like an old-fashioned pit-orchestra trombonist, fond of slapstick effects and noises; he weaves them into a music which owes at least as much to brass band and folk music as it does to jazz.

The twenty tracks here are mainly short expositions of ideas. Allen's technique isn't entirely secure, but then people who go in search of this sort of record don't expect perfection), and in fact this very quality of slight shakiness adds to the down-home feel. One hopes this isn't patronising; Allen has a genuine love of the less prestigious traditions of his instrument, and that's what gives this recording much of its character.

There are some real moments of musical imagination here, too; in the punningly-titled "Berne Baby Berne", he takes a mournful, descending melody which could come from a spiritual or a colliery band and passes it through a series of perfectly logical transformations, an achievement which points, perhaps, to deeper things beyond the frankly very enjoyable fun and games.

Richard Cochrane

Alterations Live

([Intuitive](#): IRCD001)

Steve Beresford, Peter Cusack, Terry Day, David Toop (various instruments)

Danish Intuitive Music

([Intuitive](#): IRCD003)

Compositions by Jorgen Lekkfeld, Carl Bergstrom-Nielsen, Ivan Eugen Vincze, Jorgen Plaetner

Intuitive is a new label documenting the fertile Danish scene which unites compositions for improvisors with a notion of "intuitive" performance derived from Stockhausen's '60s flirtation with Zen. The metaphysics may be dodgy, but the associated annual festival has resulted in two very impressive CDs already (see [DIMC](#) and [DIMC2](#)), and these issues are equally intriguing (a third release by Rohstoff is [reviewed separately](#)).

"Danish Intuitive Music" itself is a compilation of ten pieces by the four composers. The recordings are, perhaps bizarrely, garnered from the mid-'70s and the mid-'90s, and quite possibly represent the highlights of a long-standing private collection. The "compositions" all consist of either graphic scores -- the kind which have wiggly lines strewn across some score paper, for the musicians to interpret how they will -- or vague verbal instructions. The result is that, as you might expect, compositional logic is hard to find, and two performances of the same piece will sound wildly different.

This is made abundantly clear by the two realisations of Lekkfeld's "Madison Music", a score of the squiggly line variety.. The first is by far the more satisfactory, with Anders Keiding's bassoon joining the composer at the piano and Bergstrom-Nielsen on French Horn for an intensely linear workout. When the Edges contemporary music group tried it two decades later, however, they seem to have left out the squiggles entirely and the music is much less characterful. "Mirror Labyrinth", again featuring the composer and Bergstrom-Nielsen but this time with Ivan Vincze and singer Lene Duus, is a longer, more varied piece which is full of pleasant surprises.

Bergstrom-Nielsen will be the most familiar of these names to regular readers. His "A Meditation on Inner Global Life" is as laid-back and, well, meditative as the title suggests, but it's not lazy and the results are genuinely lovely while packing in plenty of interest. Edges return for a performance of "Game of Contrasts", which has an unpromisingly simplistic score. All the more surprising, then, that they attack it with such vigour; the group deserve at least half of the credit for the success of this track, and while it sounds a bit post-serialism-by-numbers it's an enjoyable ride. His final piece, the bizarrely-entitled "Cut it! Sark", is for accordion orchestra, and is both indescribably beautiful and full of excitement.

Ivan Vincze's pair of compositions are very odd. The "score" for "Taking a Walk" instructs the players to imagine a favourite walk and "give musical expression to it". The results of such things, of course, have very little to do with the composer, although in this case Vincze plays viola in the same group which performed Lekkfeld's "Mirror Labyrinth". The music here is a lot more sparse, and some listeners will find it rather more effective for that. The second composition is based on the literal melodic realisation of some extremely simple graphic shapes. The score looks very pleasing; the music itself seems a bit gimmicky at first, but it's strangely hypnotic and, like "Taking a Walk", it has a naivete (even a nostalgia) which is refreshing and very likeable.

Jorgen Plaetner's music is probably the most conventionally "classical" of the work represented here. "Winter Music" is full of drama, and well played by Edges, although again one wonders, looking at the score with its apparent absence of specific instructions, how much credit the composer can really be accorded for this, or even whether it counts as a composition at all. Either way, the music, which falls into a sequence of brief, unconnected segments, is well done. His "October 6th", it has to be said, sounds quite similar, except that the performers are more interested in melodic development, making the music, to this writer's ears, more inventive and rather less risk-averse. Again, the credit goes to the Lin Ensemble, who could almost certainly have performed with piece without having ever heard of Jorgen Plaetner, but regardless of that it's fearsomely intelligent music played with great commitment.

The issue of how much the composer is involved in the creation of music like this is, really, rather a red herring. The point seems to be simply that the music gets played, and whether the composer prescribes pitches and durations or just suggests frames of mind is neither here nor there. If the notion of "intuitive music" is one which requires a certain amount of aesthetic unpacking, however, the music here is generally direct, dynamic and full of invention.

Anyone familiar with the music of Alterations's constituents will be expecting plenty of invention there, too. It's easy to be scathing about this kind of thing -- self-indulgent toy box music of the sort which involves household junk and a certain level of nihilism. Well, there's something in this, in fact -- "Alterations mimic the throwaway society", Day points out -- but don't expect the music to be entirely how you expect.

Indeed, it really is hard to know whether there are sophisticated levels of irony in this music, or they're just playing things they like. At times, this buffoonish collision of jazz, classicism, circus, trash and happening is reminiscent of a sort of bastardised Ganelin Trio, but these two long pieces from about the time that the trio was becoming a sensation in the West are far more posturing and far less poised.

That's no bad thing, of course, and over the course of these two half-hour jams (there's also a very brief piece from a year earlier) we are subjected to some funny, ridiculous and often very clever improvisations. There's something of the frightening clown about it, inevitably, as the music seems to be driven by a core of angry-at-nothing-particular ranting. But this never simply flounders around or resorts to gestures, and the improvisation is quick, inventive and responsive.

One is reminded of a comment made by Evan Parker to Beresford, to the effect that the pianist was perfectly capable of playing properly, but chose to sound like a child or a complete novice. There are two edges to this, and both are firmly in evidence here. Yes, there are the whistles and toy ray guns, the ham-fisted piano banging and twanging guitars. But there's a great deal of thought lying behind these strategies, which are deliberately chosen and contrasted with straighter playing (Beresford gets through plenty of tunes in these seventy minutes). Often forbiddingly bristly, but worth the effort.

Richard Cochrane

Ivanovich: Solo Guitar

(Amish Records: ami011)

Chuck Johnson (guitars)

Paolo Angeli: Linee di Fuga

([PJP/Erosha](#): PJP002/ERH012)

Paolo Angeli (guitar)

Solo guitar records seem to come out with alarming frequency these days. They have a markedly different flavour from solo saxophone records (so common in improvised music) or solo piano ones, the mainstay of the classical world.

Johnson's offering (oddly released under the name "Ivanovich") comes from the improv end of the spectrum, with a definite rock influence. The nineteen tracks here are all very different, employing a range of techniques familiar to any avant guitarist: drumming on the strings, scraping, seeking out extreme harmonics, making percussive sounds and so on. Some tracks, such as the opening couple, feature just one technique and explore it in some depth.

The truth is that these pieces don't really make much impact. We've all heard these sounds before, and Johnson does little to string them together into musical structures. Indeed, it seems almost perverse for him to focus so closely on technique when he's not really a technically gifted player. His performance is often rather sloppy, leading to unexpected pings or dead notes where they were surely unintended (or at least where they make no musical sense).

This lack of virtuosity shouldn't be off-putting, however. Johnson has bags of energy, which he employs in the straighter tracks like "z.h.r.", a clawhammer-picked piece which wavers between country-rock and weightless abstraction. He also has a likably swaggering delivery on "curved air", ostensibly a violin bow showcase but actually an incomprehensible anecdote-without-words which weaves drunkenly around a limited range to great effect.

Johnson is definitely better on electric guitar than acoustic, and what he lacks in technical wizardry he more than makes up for with attitude and timing. This is a pretty enjoyable disc, but probably not Johnson's best format. Perhaps he's something like Marc Ribot: great in bands, less good solo. This is patchy but very appetite-whetting stuff.

Paolo Angeli, on the other hand, seems to be come from a classical background. "Linee di Fuga" is a very different-sounding record from Johnson's, although many of the same things are going on. One difference is Angeli's choice of instrument, the Sardinian guitar, which is a folk variation on the Spanish guitar and which Angeli further varies by means of preparations, extended techniques and a massive rack of effects.

It's astonishing that there are no overdubs here; Angeli's technique is of the nylon-pumping, macho speed-freak kind, and he makes several things happen at once with that atavistic attraction to difficulty for its own sake which guitarists seem stricken by. He sounds like an atonal, grating Adrian Legg.

One problem with all this is that Angeli seems to have an uncertain grasp on how to make sense of a stretch of musical time. He switches from one astonishing gymnastic display to another with little real logic. Yes, it's extremely impressive, but pieces like the title track, which switches arbitrarily between punchy straight picking and bowed orchestra-isms, can be extremely frustrating as well.

The switches in this piece, incidentally, are studio edits, not live transitions (which would surely prove impossible even for Angeli). The CD documents a mixture of improvisations and compositions (including two traditional pieces) and a combination of live playing and studio work.

Like Johnson, Angeli is probably at his most effective and at his most comfortable when he abandons the necessity to show off "new" sounds and just plays relatively straight. Then he sounds a little like Robert Fripp, mixing a strong rhythmic pulse with jagged, semi-tonal lines. Indeed, pieces like "Piano a Denti Stretti" could easily be vintage King Crimson compositions.

Looked at pessimistically, this is a failed semi-classical guitar record with dreadfully misjudged avant pretensions. But looked at another way, it's a pretty satisfying prog rock disc; there are a lot of much, much, much worse virtuosic guitar albums out there and this one will give you hours of pleasure if this kind of thing is your bag. Fripp fans are encouraged to seek it out and not be put off by the title track; others approach with more caution.

Richard Cochrane

MARTIN ARCHER-- Ghost Lily Cascade (Discus: 4CD)

Martin Archer (electronics, soprano sax, violin), Chris Bywater (electronics), Charlie Collins (electronics and flute), Michael W Evans (percussion), Simon H Fell (double bass), John Jasnoch (guitars), Martin Jones (trumpet), Brian Parsons (vibraphone), Angie Rosenfeld (cello), Max Wall (bass guitar)

MARTIN ARCHER -- Pure Water Construction (Discus: 4CD)

Martin Archer (electronics, drum machines, soprano saxophone, organ, violin), Simon H Fell (bass guitar, double bass, electronics), Gino Robair (percussion), Robin Hayward (tuba), Chris Burn (piano), Rhodri Davies (harp), Jenni Molloy (cello), Stefan Jaworzyn (guitar), Charlie Collins (bass clarinet)

The programmatic texts which accompany both of these disks refer to stagnant waters; an appropriate reference, both as an analogy and, in a more tenuous sense, as a Freudian symbol. Like a dark pool, the music has a lapidary surface which speaks of hidden depths, of activity deep beneath what is visible. Superficially, for example, the pieces on Ghost Lily Cascade often seem to go nowhere; there is little by way of conventional development. Instead, subtle ideas flit up to the surface only to vanish again, creating a music in which, moment-to-moment, as the French have it, everything changes and everything stays the same.

Archer created the compositions on the earlier disk using improvisation as a sound-source or "detail generator". His keyboards are the most prominent feature, but all but one of the tracks -- "Telecottage", the most conventional on the disk in terms of rhythm and harmonic structure, a track which a fan of The Orb, say, would have little difficulty with -- all but one includes at least one collaborator. Archer has carved up their improvisations and re-assembled them, allowing "chance to shape many of the events" but also, surely, applying careful attention to others.

"How did that story end?", with sampler work by Collins (an important sideman on this disk), is everything 88 Enemies promised to deliver but did so only sporadically -- a post-piano music of intricate angularity and eerie directionlessness, interspersed with the most disturbing musique concrete interjections -- voices, telephone tones, digital glitches, footsteps.

Ghost Lily Cascade is at once approachable and inaccessible, a beautiful building without a door. One walks around it, seeing intriguing movements through the windows, always shut off from its secrets. Dense, knotty and abstract, its surface as blank as a pool of water, it calls to mind Adorno's conception of high modernism, an enigmatic, plastic form which confronts its social context with its own alien impenetrability.

Pure Water Construction is similar but completely different (that paradox again). The premise has shifted, and this makes for a new focus in the music. This time, it seems, Archer has allowed a single solo improvisation to substantially structure each of the five main sections (there is an introduction which seems to be more of a studio cut-up). These improvisations were then taken away and given the studio treatment (by both Archer and Fell), following their logic but developing it with edits from other improvisations and electronic manipulations and re-orchestrations.

It starts -- after a wonderfully hectic "Part 0" which sounds like, but of course isn't, a group improvisation -- with tubist Robin Hayward. His steam-train textures, overlaid with bells, motors which sound like running water and odd tapping sounds manages to hold the imagination for a good seven minutes before he moves into more conventional, note-based territory.

Contributions from Chris Burn, Rhodri Davies, Jenni Molloy and Stefan Jaworzyn follow; each piece sounds incontrovertibly like its originator, and as one listens one really begins to get a sense of what Archer and Fell have achieved here. Keeping the integrity of each performance, they have transformed it into an impossibly sophisticated composition; a result which would be nigh-on impossible, anyway, using either composition or improvisation alone. Fell even crowbars in one of his trademark serialist jazz heads ("Part 3"), but on the whole the feel is similar to that of Ghost Lily Cascade, brooding, sombre and restless below the surface, with less in common with jazz than with electroacoustic composition. As a result of its methodology, however, the music on this disk is much closer to the familiar models of free improvisation than its predecessor. That, though, might just

make it even more subversive in the face of all those improv purists who look on the studio somewhat as members of the Temperance Association used to regard the local pub.

Without wanting to make too much of the Freudian angle, the metaphor of a body of standing water comes up too often to be ignored. Of course, it has many connotations -- its secrecy (how deep is it?), its hidden threat (drowning, lurking Loch Ness monsters), its blankly reflecting surface on which one can only project one's own image, transformed by its own movement. These connotations may lead Freudian readers into flights of fancy about Narcissus, and our relation as listeners to this music might be likened to the psychoanalytic Narcissus gazing into the reflecting pool; it may just be that the acousmatic influence is strong here, and composers in that area tend towards images of before nature and absorption into it. Whatever your preference, these are two beautiful, well-played, conceptually rich disks which come highly recommended.

Richard Cochrane

See also...

You will find reviews of several other disks featuring Rhodri Davies and Simon H Fell on the CD Review Index page (use your browser's "search in page" facility to find them).

Martin Archer: 88 Enemies

([Discus](#): 10CD)

88 Enemies is a composition for electric piano and electronics. Much of the time, the former dominates, justifying Archer's claim that the piece's eight movements often sound "almost like contemporary piano music". The relationship between the two sound-sources is, however, subjected to a number of variations. In "Vol. storm", the electronics subtly accentuate and extend the piano without ever dominating; on "High Pass" there is virtually no piano, while the electronics seem to have been dispensed with entirely on "Louder, Faster and Forever". "MF-FM" uncharacteristically uses a dislocated groove which sounds like an Autechre cast-off, morphing it into a series of spoken word samples. Overall, the tension and dynamic between piano and electronics are well-handled.

The writing for the piano sounds like, but isn't, academic serialism. Archer does not have much to say in terms of pitch relationships -- dissonant groupings dominate, but at no point do recurring motifs really develop (there are a few repetitions). Instead, it is rhythmic units which recur and lend structure to each piece; this, and an apparent general indebtedness, gives the work a whiff of Messiaen. The problem is that Archer's rhythms are mostly so lumpen and uninvolved as to leave the listener wondering at what point the actual idea of the piece is going to emerge. If these were improvisations, that would be unfortunate; in compositions, it is inexcusable.

It's unclear why Archer chose to write pianistically in the way that he has here -- it is certainly not his strong suit. It would be unfair simply to claim that he is good at making noises but not at making music; his musical voice just happens to come through much more clearly in the more expressionistic, open-ended forms provided by electronics. If his strengths are electronics, timbral detail and use of space, however, 88 Enemies is dominated by piano, rhythmically structured and predominantly dense and busy. Occasionally the music does catch fire, but not as often as it should given a strong basic idea and Archer's manifest ability to carry off the technical side.

Richard Cochrane

Martin Archer: Winter Pilgrim Arriving

([Discus](#): 12CD)

Martin Archer (synths, sopranino sax, clarinets, recorders, "vioelectronics"), Benjamin Bartholemew (guitars), Derek Saw (cornet), Simon H Fell (bass), Tim Cole (guitar), Charlie Collins (flute, sampling), Gino Robair (percussion, one track only), James Archer (objects, one track only), Mick Beck (bassoon), Sedayne (crwth, one track only)

[Ghost Lily](#)

[Cascade](#)

Here, as on that disc and the equally fine "[Pure Water Construction](#)", Archer works with a loose collection of musicians, whose improvisations are sampled and then reorganised into what Archer loosely refers to as compositions. The sound-world is fantastically rich and otherworldly, like a dream of music on another planet; the acoustics are all wrong, instrumentation comes and goes, but the whole usually sounds natural. It's just like listening to musicians playing together with a mike in front of them, albeit musicians with vary numbers of limbs playing instruments made from unknown materials.

One thing which gives this CD it's particular quality is a rather surprising affiliation with English folk music. That's dangerous in the wrong hands, leading to the risible kind of wimsy associated with prog-folk and the Cambridge School. Clearly this is something Archer has some fondness for, but his relocation of Bert Jansch (or whoever) into outer space is touching as well as surreal, poignant beyond any accusation of novelty.

As if slightly concerned about accusations of "going soft" or (heaven forfend) "selling out", Archer tends to place these folksy passages in an ambiance of thunderous noise, as if his imaginary guitarists, recordists and Ulelian pipers (imitated by Archer's phenomenally accomplished sopranino) were stranded on some nightmarish hard shoulder in a J G Ballard short story.

This is so zeitgeisty it's scary, and Archer really ought to be better known on the other side of the Atlantic, where chancers abound doing this sort of thing with little real musical commitment, often in search of witty postmodern gags or a sort of ersatz beat sensibility. This is an ultra-contemporary version of avant folk which can stand shoulder-to-shoulder with Eugene Chadbourne's reimagining of hillbilly music in its lack of respect for any dogma, be it from the world of folk, improv or the electroacoustic avant garde. In its sense of unified diversity and its ever-changing atmospherics, one might also mention Zorn's film music: it really is that good, and it's also distinctively English and completely unique.

Anyone who has been considering investigating his music -- or completing their collection -- is advised to do so without delay. The thought of all of it disappearing into a dark hole bearing the dread word "deleted" is enough to send a shudder down the spine. If it's going to happen then one ought to stock up on supplies now.

[Richard Cochrane](#)

Koji Asano: Flow-Augment

([Solstice](#): 12)

Koji Asano: Preparing for April

([Solstice](#): 13)

Koji Asano: Momentum

([Solstice](#): 14)

Koji Asano (compositions)

Asano appears to come from a "straight" classical background, and to have a deep interest in the classical tradition, including its avant garde, as something to work within and against rather than to simply disregard as irrelevant. Hence, subverting the traditional hi-fi snobbery of that genre, "Preparing for April" takes some monolithic, churning compositions from Terry Riley or Charlenagne Palestine's limb of the American avant garde and records them on something like a dictaphone, creating grainy, muffled and disorientating soundscapes with no bass and much distortion.

What sounds like a recipe for unlistenable nonsense turns out to be an intriguing listen as the music transforms itself into an abstract wall of noise, ever-fluctuating but never really resolving itself into the sound of a piano. The fact that the music is, in itself, not terribly "difficult" -- it's quasi-tonal and highly rhythmic -- only makes this more affecting, as something which sounds as if it ought to be very tame and accessible continually refuses to be anything but weird and surprising. An extremely effective contribution to conceptual music, which can be so tiresomely self-satisfied and shallow.

"Flow-Augment" sounds far more conventional, and maybe it's just that: two pianos, violin, viola, cello and bass tackle three fifteen-to-twenty minute pieces in a politely classical-sounding acoustic. These pieces are very enjoyable works with much in common with Berio and some of the Scandinavian school (Magnus Lindberg springs to mind), but the concept-heavy Asano of "Preparing..." seems entirely absent.

These two CDs, then, make a very peculiar juxtaposition, but there's no reason why any composer should be forced to work with big ideas all the time. Although not startlingly original, this music does have plenty of character and it certainly isn't bland. Asano structures each piece in segments, making them move from scene to scene like a film, carrying certain motifs or ideas across the boundaries. Those who enjoy this branch of "new music" are urged to check it out.

After these two discs, it's hard to know what to expect from "Momentum", the composer's latest. In fact, it's in a whole different field, that of, well, what one might call "electrical music". A couple of bass speakers are fitted with contact mikes on their cones and manipulated to produce surprisingly varied sounds from such a limited source.

"Momentum" is a triumph. The fast pulsations of the woofers as they play what must be inaudibly low notes becomes, in Asano's hands, a material for extremely subtle explorations of very fast rhythms, rhythms which mutate, change speed, develop weird timbres or lie on top of one another. The effect is captivating; all the clocks in the house stop. Weaving between this quiet thunder are whistles of feedback, gracefully controlled to create singing, sweeping lines which come and go as the music rolls relentlessly onward. Highly recommended.

Richard Cochrane

Tanguay, Pierre: La Musique de mon Disque

([Ambiances Magnetiques](#): AM079CD)

Pierre Tanguay (composition, objects)

Asano, Koji: The Secret Path of Rain

([Solstice](#): 15)

Koji Asano (composition)

Kahn, Jason: Analogues

([Cut](#): CUT004)

Jason Kahn (percussion, samples, sound collage)

One pleasing surprise which still awaits many adventurous listeners is the discovery of conceptual composer Koji Asano. He works with traditional and electroacoustic composition, and each of his Solstice releases is wildly different, but those who enjoy the noisier end of electronic composition are strongly advised to start with this one, "A Secret Path of Rain", which as well as containing some truly visionary music is beautifully packaged in a design by the composer.

On this occasion, Asano has gone for what seems, on paper, to be a very conventional route: the construction of music using bands of white noise, contorted into semi-rhythmic, semi-melodic abominations by the miracle of electronics. But this isn't just an album of collaged blips, buzzes, squarks and glitches: oh no. This stuff has been assembled with meticulous care and an enviable ability to grasp the long form of a piece which eludes the great majority of people working in this field.

The composition falls into two parts, each around 25 minutes in length. The first is a relentless barrage of ideas which can only be compared to a Coltrane solo, and enormously extended elaboration of fairly simple material with consistent logic and intelligence. What just puts the icing on the cake is that, very occasionally, the original sound-sources for these noises creep through, banal dance and pop sounds just audible under a thick patina of noise or -- to change the metaphor to something more in keeping with the artwork -- the trace of something whose features have been almost entirely worn away.

The second half takes the same material and heavily punctuates it with silence, making it a far less comfortable listen. Truly nerve-jangling sounds emerge at odd moments, and the pauses between them are compulsive, horrible and titillating at the same time. It's perhaps structurally harder to grasp for the listener than the first half's fluent, improvisatory feel, but the high drama it contains more than makes up for that. There's a good chance that Asano could become as revered a figure as Zorn, and for similar reasons, although the fact that he is far less accessible and a far more focussed postmodernist than this writer has ever come across before may stand in his way of commercial success. Let's hope not: this is excellent work.

Pierre Tanguay inhabits an altogether calmer, more listener-friendly world. He may be a bit lighter than Asano -- no, correction, he's *much* lighter, the sort of thing you can play in company without too many people leaving -- but as we all know, there's a place for that too. This record, presumably Tanguay's first, is a fine piece of work, and ought to (but probably won't) secure him some crossover success with the ambient techno crowd.

Actually, though, this disk isn't as electronic as it sounds. Like London's Adam Bowman, Tanguay plays a wide variety of objects which he uses as sources for the multi-tracked collages presented here: wine glasses, bells, toys and the other familiar stuff. The results, however, are quite different from the percussive circus one might expect, and the album sounds far more like a piece of electronica than anything else. Since it's a studio creation, one is tempted to think of it as just that, although presumably it is the outcome of Tanguay having played live, in company or solo.

Tanguay's approach to rhythm is far more conventional than Asano's, although there's no shortage of subtlety here. The relationship with the ambient tradition seems ambivalent: listen closely if you like, and you will find interesting things, but just stick it on as background music and it works wonders. Actually -- and it's something of a controversial thing to say about an Ambiances Magnetiques release, I suppose -- the genre this shares most with is easy listening.

Not the pop songs of Bacharach and his ilk, but the weird ethno-forgeries of Arther Lyman and (to a lesser extent) Martin Denny. To translate this world into something altogether more out-there without losing some of its intrinsic qualities is no mean achievement, and just because it doesn't storm the barricades of culture doesn't mean it's short on cleverness or contemporary relevance. The album offers sixteen tracks of extraordinary variety but sounds end-to-end like a coherent project, and hence offers plenty to enjoy and to think about.

Koji Asano: Flow-Augment

([Solstice](#): 12)

Koji Asano: Preparing for April

([Solstice](#): 13)

Koji Asano: Momentum

([Solstice](#): 14)

Koji Asano (compositions)

In a sense, reviewing these three releases together makes very little sense. One is a set of performances for classical chamber group, one a set of deliberately deteriorated recordings of piano music and the other a highly minimal electroacoustic exploration. Yet reviewing them together is crucial, because they all come from the "pen" of the same composer, Barcelona-based Koji Asano.

Asano appears to come from a "straight" classical background, and to have a deep interest in the classical tradition, including its avant garde, as something to work within and against rather than to simply disregard as irrelevant. Hence, subverting the traditional hi-fi snobbery of that genre, "Preparing for April" takes some monolithic, churning compositions from Terry Riley or Charlenagne Palestine's limb of the American avant garde and records them on something like a dictaphone, creating grainy, muffled and disorientating soundscapes with no bass and much distortion.

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Richard Cochrane

Koji Asano: Quoted Landscape

([Solstice](#): 20)

Koji Asano (composition, realisation)

Asano's compositions are never simple or straightforward, neither immediately accessible nor open to lazy categorisation. Many share more in common with art projects than with most music, although they're always realised not only with absolute precision but also with impressive musicality. There's no doubt, as there is with some projects in this field, as to whether one is listening to music at all, but there is a delicious lack of clarity about how to approach it nonetheless.

This has hardly been more true than in the case of the current project. Initially it sounds like an analogue version of the digital noise out of which he built the wonderful [The Secret Path of Rain](#), being formed as it is from the crackle of radio static and other electrical sounds. It's almost an acoustic project, then -- except it isn't like that at all.

There is in fact nothing quaint or nostalgic about these sounds. There often can be; they can make the music itself seem to appear from a haze of distance. Radio static can form a vaseline-smeared lens redolent of huddling over wartime radio broadcasts or seeking out foreign or clandestine stations at the extremes of the tuning band. That is, of course, when static is added to something, when something (if only occasionally) emerges out of it.

There's nothing, in fact, on Asano's radio at all, however hard he searches. The dial seems to move through various bands of electrical disturbance of different sorts, but they might well just be storms; there's no sign of human presence here. Except, that is, for one very important sign. For the hand turning the dial (or whatever -- this is more layered and more cunningly pieced-together than the analogy suggests) is very distinctly present. The analogue nature of the work extends to the analogue of human action in the response of the sound. One can, at times, quite clearly hear Asano's gestures in the sounds he uses. That's something that feels valid whether he used such gestures, quite different ones, or none at all in the actual process of making it; the human presence, real or apparent, is the thing.

This very personal element removes any question of this music being categorised with the impersonal, "isolationist" school of electroacoustics, despite the apparently depersonalised nature of the sound itself. It's almost intimate, at times. Yet one is also conscious of the highly-wrought nature of what one hears, because it sounds nothing like someone actually fiddling with a radio dial. Superficially it's identical, and that's where some or even all of the material might have been sourced, but it's been cut together and subtly layered to create a kind of dramatic monologue.

There's little question that Asano is working at the bleeding edge of experimental music. His work is conceptually rich but also uncommonly well-made. Anyone who complains of a lack of craft in new music ought to listen to what he does; they may have to inspect it closely before they notice the intense care with which it's been made, but anyway that's not atypical of fine craftsmanship in general. Asano makes music which speaks a very contemporary language, and almost everything he does requires more than one listen before it becomes apparent that it's in fact extraordinarily good. This isn't by any means his most accessible piece, and it's probably not a good place to start with his music for that reason, but it's a profound, even moving composition.

Richard Cochrane

Koji Asano: The Last Shade of Evening Falls

([Solstice](#): 16, 17, 18 and 19)

Koji Asano (composition and realisation)

Regular readers will already be well aware of the excellent Koji Asano; his Solstice label continues to document his adventurous, varied and above all technically ingenious music. On this occasion, though, he's really pushed the boat out: four CDs, each one containing a single track of over an hour in length, representing what might roughly be called the four movements of "The Last Shade of Evening Falls", a sort of enormous, post-modern organ symphony of gobsmacking invention.

It's not that there's an actual organ involved (at least, there doesn't seem to be), but the whole structure of the music somehow recalls that repertoire, and especially its post-war incarnation. This is helped along by the fact that the sounds are often organ-like, but there's more to it than that. The music's constituent parts -- its independent, rather fluffy bass, the chords which seem to come from somewhere high in the rafters, notes which erupt only to vanish again -- closely parallel the traditional vocabulary of the organ solo.

The music is monumental and unashamedly atmospheric, reverberating in a vast (synthetic) space and unfolding with graceful slowness. Everything is poised, sculptural. There's certainly none of the aural violence of "A Secret Path of Rain" here; this music has a strongly ecclesiastical feel, one which a more modern term like "meditative" doesn't really capture. It's almost Gothic in its crepuscular dramas. One wants to listen to it by candlelight, in a stiff draft, while sitting on a hard wooden pew.

The fact that Asano can compose something so long which can hold your attention is alone very impressive. This writer must confess to not having had the time to listen to it in one go, but doing so would be a rewarding experience. Each individual hour is filled with an entirely unsentimental beauty, underpinned by a sound, logical architectural sense. He tells stories and builds a structure at the same time. There's something almost mediaeval about all this.

And yet there's also something ultra-modern. The organ isn't an organ but something else. Hard to tell what, exactly; something which can wobble around as if underwater or break down into static as if on the radio. The whole thing is a simulacrum of an organ voluntary during which the flow of time has slowed down to an ooze, resonating a facsimile of the air inside a cathedral. Like everything the composer has released of late, although on a mind-bogglingly larger scale, this is verging on genius. To repeat what has been said here several times before, Asano is a creator of strong, sometimes demanding music which deserves to be much better known.

Richard Cochrane

Ask: Disconnected Bliss

([Discuss](#): 8CD)

Martin Archer (synthesisers, electronics, soranino sax), John Jasnoch (guitars, electronics)

Archer and Jasnoch have really come up with the goods here -- a great disk of electro-improv which is utterly contemporary and full of variety. Archer seems to have been listening to some quality drum 'n' bass, or perhaps some Paul Schutze, and his electronics skitter along in that lopsided way, a sort of dance music for insects. Most duets of electronics and live instruments are hit-and-miss: this just keeps on hitting.

Only in this kind of music can a piano fill turn into a controlled squeal of static with apparent spontaneity. Archer seems to take seriously the idea that electronics put all possible sounds at your disposal, but he doesn't lose sight of the fact that music has a history and that reference-points are useful, if not essential. Instead of going all-out for abstraction, then, he also throws drum tracks, breakbeats, atonal piano and jazzy sopranino into the generally dark ambient mix. The result is sometimes exhilarating, as on the teasing "Mojo Filter", which keeps promising a groove but remains for the most part subterranean.

Into this, Jasnoch launches himself with a variety of guitar sounds, mostly fairly conventional ones, his signature being a not unpleasant sort of untreated electric twang reminiscent of Jan Akkerman. He has a knack for finding the right note for the right place, as with his clanking, rather haunting chords on "Mir". At other times, he goes for full-on solos; these are not always successful, but if he sometimes struggles with only Archer's more abstract noisescapes for company, he sometimes hits the nail right on the head, too. And in this kind of music, the drifting feel of a soloist who has come loose from his tether and is searching for ideas need not be completely out of place. "Amber Leaf Prism" puts him in a solo context (albeit with overdubs) and he makes a convincing statement, while his interaction with some chirping electronics on "Almond" is lovely, spinning music out of seemingly random events.

Richard Cochrane

Assumed Possibilities

([Confront](#) : FRONT05)

Chris Burn (piano), Rhodri Davies (harp), Phil Durrant (violin), Mark Wastell (cello)

There's little point in picking out individual contributions on a session like this; it seems that the whole purpose of this group is to create an ensemble sound, not a series of solos or duos. Although one player may emerge into prominence, it rarely lasts long and all four are much more interested in where the quartet can take the music than in making personal statements. That's a huge strength, because this very rarefied kind of music-making can easily get hijacked by musicians with too much ego or just an insufficient understanding of the genre.

While one can clearly hear the different musicians' approaches coming through in the music, then, the most characteristic and successful moments are those which make the ear forget it's hearing four different instruments. The group's composition, and the strategies which each member employs within it, foster this effect and it's obviously intentional. The sound is of bowed, struck and plucked strings, all three techniques and a hundred others being employed by all four musicians as if their instruments were just four different flavours of the same basic object, or even four corners of one enormous machine. Take "Ysbeillais rified'r ser" (Davies almost always manages to get some Welsh track titles into his projects), with its volcanic opening; "nobody solos, everybody solos" doesn't even come close.

Just because it involves improvisation, this kind of group tend to get lumped together with free jazz. One might as well compare Bismillah Khan with David S Ware; the differences could hardly be more striking. Once and for all: this disc, like many others in the free improv school, has nothing whatsoever to do with jazz. Simply because it lacks a consensual label doesn't mean that "chamber improv" or whatever you like to call it is simply a spin-off from something else. This kind of music is an entity in itself.

These are intricate, complicated improvisations which demand your undivided attention. Put them on as background music and they're pretty meaningless; sit with them and give them your time and each piece starts to make its own kind of sense. They're numbered editions in a limited pressing of 100, so get 'em while they're hot.

Richard Cochrane

Derek Bailey and Steve Lacy: Outcome

([Potlatch](#): P299)

Derek Bailey (guitar), Steve Lacy (soprano sax)

Well, here's Bailey again in the company of a free jazzer; Derek Bailey who, despite an early background in jazz, was always the Boy Most Likely to do Something Else. His duets with Braxton are widely disliked, and while the session released on Victor as *Moments Precieux* does indeed have some nice moments, the nay-sayers are basically right, and the thing seems to make precious little sense.

Jon C Morgan is quite right to remind us, in his sleeve notes, that duets don't have to be done on entirely agreed common ground. If it's important for musicians to bring their own voices to the table, then it must surely be okay for those voices to be distinctive, even quite disparate. This is certainly a disparate pairing, and it does, in a manner of speaking, work.

Lacy spends all of his time getting hold of a melodic line and refusing to let go of it. He plays like a man obsessed, as if trying to blot out the sound around him using only his horn and his legendarily bottomless imagination. The sound around him is, of course, Bailey himself, and Bailey is never anyone but himself, as an unbending and stubborn a player as British improvised music has ever produced.

Needless to say, Bailey doesn't give Lacy any of the chords that the reedsman would perhaps like to have under him. Nor does he approximate a jazzy kind of rhythmic approach, seeking to punctuate Lacy's lines or drop bombs between his notes. Nope, Bailey just goes ahead and plays, almost as if he were playing a solo gig and had accidentally left open a communicating door. His choices of what to play where can sound perverse, although they also seem to make sense, at least within the world of this CD, just as Mock Turtle Soup makes sense in the looking-glass world.

Outcome is an alternative way of doing duet albums. It throws all of the rules out of the window or, to be more accurate, it looks at them in the mirror and acts on what it reads there. And of course, in the background, one knows perfectly well that Lacy and Bailey are listening hard and doing what they do for reasons which may well lie beyond this listener's competence to assess. Whatever they're doing it, the results are splendidly strange.

Richard Cochrane

Derek Bailey: Fairly Early with Postscripts

([Emanem](#) : 4027)

Derek Bailey (guitar), Anthony Braxton (flute, sax), Kent Carter (bass), John Stevens (drums)

Not a long-lost quartet session, mouth-watering though that would be, but a selection of out-takes, unissued and long-scarce tracks from almost three decades of Bailey's epoch-defining career. They run from the early pieces of 1971 to the "Post Postscript" of 1998, recorded specifically for this release.

Those "Six Fairly Early Pieces" are from an Emanem LP issued ten years ago and now unavailable, and it's good to see them back. They have all the hallmarks of Bailey's style, using on this occasion a single volume pedal separated from the acoustic sound in the stereo field. Also included is the very short and chaotically funny "In Whose Tradition?" from three years later; again, the stereo effects are used to enhance Bailey's palette without becoming gimmicky. Perhaps not so masterful as some of his subsequent work, these are welcome documents of his development and still knock most experimental guitar-playing into a cocked hat.

"In Whose Tradition?" was recorded on the same day as Bailey was rehearsing with Braxton, and two out-takes from their rehearsal tapes show a very different guitarist. The oft-made criticism of the Braxton/Bailey duo -- that these are two masters from different musical traditions who have very little to say to one another -- isn't supported by their live recordings, but these two tracks are certainly dispensable. Bailey scrapes and saws, going for noise rather than notes, which is surprising when you step outside the rehearsal room and hear them sparring with harmonic complexities far beyond anything resembling changes playing. The result is not terribly flattering for either player, although again perhaps the documentary value of these excerpts justifies their release.

The same can't be said for the previously unissued solo takes from 1980; this is prime Bailey, and one wonders just how much of this stuff exists given that it's taken nigh-on twenty years for these to come out. Fifteen minutes of pure magic, followed by two short and exhilarating trios with Carter and a bombastic Stevens, long unavailable and heartily welcomed back to the catalogue. Carter is a bit on the quiet side, but overall these are an extremely involving listen.

The "Postscripts" refer to tape letters which Bailey sent to Martin Davidson (who runs Emanem) while the latter was in the US at the end of the '70s. They mix guitar playing with talk from Bailey in an engaging and spontaneous manner, making them rather intimate portraits of the man which Davidson must have enjoyed enormously. Bailey plays like an angel -- often drifting into uncharacteristically jazzy areas, for satirical purposes but revealingly nonetheless -- but his words, taken out of their postcard context, are a little distracting. However much we might agree with him, his political points are heartfelt but there's not much news here. Edward Heath is "the old twot"; Thatcher is "the evil bitch"; "they really are a pathetic lot this time", he mutters. Plenty of vitriol here but not much analysis, which is perfectly understandable in what he was never expecting to be a public document.

Added to these are the "Postscripts" themselves, the second of which begins with the rather on-point observation that "there must be a limit to how many times we can do this". But these, I suppose, aren't to be thought of as completely-realised musical performances so much as spontaneous sketches, highly personal documents, something like a great writer's diary. On that analogy, then, these are not for the casual listener but will be of great interest to the completist. The disc as a whole, though, has much to recommend it, and one shouldn't be put off by the quirkiness of the final twenty minutes.

Richard Cochrane

Derek Bailey & Joelle Leandre: No Waiting

([Potlach](#): P198)

Derek Bailey (Guitar), Joelle Leandre (Bass)

The years haven't mellowed Derek Bailey. This recording, in common with others of recent years, is at times ear-splitting, whatever volume you listen at. In some ways, he is reminiscent of Cecil Taylor, stubbornly pursuing his own relentlessly intelligent path, a unique and uncompromising voice in a genre which is full of them.

Bailey is, of course, one of the true originals of the guitar. He has taken to using two volume pedals (for stereo effects and also tonal variation) and a few other bits and pieces, but he still relies heavily on the most sophisticated of all guitar technologies, his hands. He has developed a style which is instantly recognisable, a scratching, rattling, popping vocabulary of the timbres which most guitarists train themselves to avoid.

Like Cecil Taylor too, his melodic and harmonic sense is acute but easily overlooked by listeners and playing partners alike. Bailey may be a percussive player – his deliberately awkward rhythms are oddly mesmerising and he swings despite having no apparent connection to traditional jazz time – but he also plays notes, showers of them, thousands and thousands of chords and melodic fragments. Like Taylor, he puts these together in a way which makes perfect sense, to the extent that one feels that, if he were to lose concentration for a moment, he might play a wrong note, and everyone would surely notice.

Joelle Leandre is a strong yet lyrical voice on the bass, and fuses well with this side of Bailey's playing. The guitarist takes the lead ideas-wise – on all but one track he is the first to start playing, and an initial gesture from Bailey is always one pregnant with information – but Leandre's contribution here is critical, if more subtle, and for much of the time she is an equal partner. Her long, bowed notes and ametrical ostinatos are not water-treading, as such techniques can sometimes be, but clear and careful development.

Leandre takes the time you have to take with Bailey to make sense of the ideas which develop when playing with him. Confronted by his storm of sound, it must be tempting to jump in, to match him note-for-note, and yet his music is actually quite slow-moving, if filled with fascinating detail. This is what prevents this disc from becoming hectoring, for all that its surface is frenetic. The notes may come thick and fast, but the underlying motion is sure-footed and deliberate, leaving the listener constantly at the seat's edge wondering what will happen next -- in the way that only really fine free improvised music can. As with everything Bailey has done in recent years, this one is a distinctive and exciting recording which can be recommended without the slightest hesitation.

Richard Cochrane

Ellen Band: 90% Post Consumer Sound

([XI Records](#): XI124)

Ellen Band (tapes etc)

Ellen Band works mostly with tapes, although a couple of tracks here include live musicians. Her music isn't musique concrete, and it isn't quite minimalism, although it has much in common with both. Her recordings are heavily edited and composed, but there is a real sense of the accidental and aleatoric in her work, too. Something of an enigma at first, then, these five pieces.

One thing which is immediately striking is the very limited sound palette in each piece, but the composition of those palettes is done according to the logic of the piece and is consequently quite variable. "Railroad Gamelan", for example, uses sounds from, you guessed it, trains and various other train-related phenomena such as a jangling bell and a clanking hammer. "Swinging Sings", on the other hand, restricts itself to two sources, but conceptually they're unrelated: a child's creaking swing and Band's own violin, played somewhat imitatively. These kinds of choices make each composition very different in texture from the last; Band may take the chaotic noise of the real world as her source but her music is evidently thought out rather carefully, and although they're described as "field recordings" these are anything but.

The pieces are not all of uniform accessibility, either. The first two tracks referred to above are pretty easy to get hold of; they deal in sounds which have pictorial indices even if those pictures get a bit skewed in the process. "Railroad Gamelan" is like one of those futurist paintings of trains, a slow-motion, cubist rendering of the thing thundering through a crossing; an event which would take a few seconds stretched and analysed into nine or ten minutes, and wonderful to listen to. The swings piece is more like a Jasper Johns, gestural and not quite abstract, coy and faintly ironic but enjoying the nostalgic simplicity of itself in spite of itself. "Closet Bird" is slighter, an electronic bird which warbles with a disturbing evenness.

Things do get tougher than this, though. The twenty-minute "Radiatore" is very hard to place, a lowercase composition of hissing air accompanied by drips and metallic clanks. Amazingly, the sounds do form into a very minimal kind of music, and although it sounds like a noisy radiator it's been cut together to form dynamic peaks and troughs, temporal rushes and lulls. Or maybe it hasn't; that uncertainty is part of the fun, of course.

The final track, "Minimally Tough" is a binaural recording ostensibly of a performance by five people. They're all standing around an enormous piece of bubble-wrap, or that's what it sounds like anyway. Sometimes the rustling, crinkling sounds take on the quality of heavy rain; at other times they sound like, well, like bubble wrap. This is the hardest piece of the lot to get anything out of, but it's obviously been crafted and thought about with some care.

Band's music is characterised, at least on this evidence, by an attentive pleasure in sounds as they are. She assembles them and, of course, transforms them, but she never seems to do so with the intention of improving them. In many cases these are detailed studies of very specific, real-world sounds. Their relationship with traditional music is tenuous, but Band has a tendency towards simple arch-like schemes which ensure that the listener never gets lost. There's huge amounts to enjoy here for the adventurous headphonaut.

Richard Cochrane

Glen Hall and Outsource: The Roswell Incident

([Leo](#): CDLR313)

[Glen Hall](#) (reeds, electronics), Roswell Rudd (trumpet), Allan Molnar (vibes), Michael Morse (bass), Michael Occhipinti (guitar, banjo), Banjo Barry Romberg (drums)

Bassrespanse

([Owlsong](#): OWL2001)

Vattel Cherry (bass), Jane Wang (bass), [Alan Lewine](#) (bass), David Kaczorowski (bass), Marjani Dele (voice, one track only), Benjamin Tomassetti (alto sax, one track only), Daniel Powell (tenor sax, one track only) [website: www.bassrespanse.com]

Hall's Outsource is different band from the one which appeared on "[Hallucinations](#)", but a similar sound thanks to the presence of the mighty Roswell Rudd and the extremely talented Allan Molnar on vibes, an unusual instrument to hear in this kind of funky, contemporary free jazz. Vattel Cherry's daring double bass quartet is working in a similar area, pulsed and recognisably jazzy, but of course in a very different sound-world.

Hall is a good enough reedsman although not an outstanding one; his main strengths are composition and arrangement, in which he recalls the likes of Threadgill, Richard Abrams and others of the Chicago school of free jazz which was more influenced by hard bop and the blues than the high-energy players whose names and music were perhaps better known at the time. As such, the music is broadly non-tonal but otherwise very traditionally jazzy; even those who normally shy away from anything more difficult than Monk or Blakey will find most of this music familiar.

The participants here are all of good stock: Occhipinti, in particular, makes a strong impression, a bit impersonal but full of great ideas. Rudd, of course, is majestic, and he and Hall make a frontline sound which is somehow bigger than it ought to be. Molnar's vibes cool the temperature a little, but he's as smart as a pianist and provides challengingly dynamic harmonies for soloists to bounce off. Romberg is a bit busy for this sort of thing, but not enough to cause problems; Morse holds everything together with a slow, slinky swagger.

This is a more focussed and much more impressive record than "[Hallucinations](#)". Fans of free jazz at the Tim Berne end of the spectrum will probably love it, and while it's not the most difficult thing Leo are likely to put out this year, it's extremely well-crafted and worthy of wider recognition.

It's one thing to do this kind of thing with two horns and a rhythm section, and another thing entirely to attempt it with four double basses. Vattel Cherry, however, as done just that, and pulled it off, too. Bassrespanse are an audacious undertaking, but the music is entirely convincing.

The arrangements are, as you might expect, the thing. These pieces contain a great deal of composition and the layering of percussive, pizzicato and arco elements enables the quartet to create their own virtual equivalent of drums and horns. There's very little cheating -- some small percussion instruments make appearances, nothing else -- and that's part of the pleasure of a group like this; one hears the whole palette of free jazz through a very specific filter, which can be extremely enlightening and full of surprises.

Solos are generally taken arco and, as you might expect, they're often more avant garde than the sorts of things Hall and Outsource get up to. Here there's far more energetic scraping or plucking going on, restless and often abandoning pulsed rhythms. These are emphasised, obviously, in collective improvisations like "Ready Set Go", but even these aren't undisciplined -- the four create sonic textures and stay with them, evolving them slowly rather than running about aimlessly as the title might suggest. There are also through-composed pieces like the gorgeous "Waltz for Four Bases" and the sprechgesang "Louis Devereaux", Dele's guest spot. The words of the latter tell a not-very-interesting story about the eponymous character watching his own funeral, but the performance is exuberant enough to carry it. The reedsmen guest together on the last track, a rather bitty affair with some nice moments.

Bassrespanse are, particularly as an unaugmented quartet, a fascinating listening experience. Not because groups of basses have never played this kind of music before, but because these players seem to have developed a way of playing it which is extremely effective, both traditional and experimental. By its very nature it may not be a long-lived project, so try to catch up with them if you can.

Richard Cochrane

John Bickerton Trio: Shadow Boxes

([Leo Lab](#): CD064)

John Bickerton (piano), Matthew Heyner (bass), Rashid Bakr (drums)

Mario Pavone Trio: Remembering Thomas

([Knitting Factory Records](#): KFR257) Mario Pavone (bass), Peter Madsen (piano), Matt Wilson (drums)

Piano trios are one of the standard formats for testing out ideas or making statements in jazz and improvised music, just as the solo piano is for composers of new classical music. Its very standardised nature makes it transparent: it has a history, but it's also something we accept automatically, leaving us free to stop worrying about whether the instrumentation really works and get down to the business of listening to the notes.

Both of these records are about notes, really, and they're both about compositions, although Pavone's more so than Bickerton's. Bickerton's trio play his own compositions, while Pavone's play Thomas Chapin's; the former often shoot off at free-improvised tangents, the former have harmonic structures which give each of the freer passages its own distinctive taste. Two approaches, then, to similar ideas.

Bickerton's compositions are wonderful things, reminiscent of Mary Lou Williams's, Monkish but in an updated way, bringing dissonance and that apparently awkward grace to the fore and letting swing transform into the pulse of free improvisation. "Stilts and Pirouettes" is impossibly catchy, and the theme of "Meeting after Dark" has a big pinch of Mal Waldron's lovely, unsentimental balladry stirred into it before launching into a firework display. Heyner is a real powerhouse on the bass, a big, loud, thumping player and, although he sticks close to the pianist most of the time, he's constantly contributing something interesting.

Bickerton's examinations of the prepared piano don't fare so well; they just seem pointlessly noisy, the notes blunted or rattling without great purpose, the whole thing becoming too bludgeoning to be effective. A shame, but it doesn't happen too often, and even when it does his partners pick up the slack and keep your interest going. Bakr is a strange fish, taking a polyrhythmic approach to everything else, so that he sounds perfectly in time with himself and drifts in and out of phase with Bickerton and Heyner. That's a great tactic, one which most free jazz drummers employ now and again, but Bakr makes a trademark of it. No complaints from this writer: when it's done well, as it is here, it can sound like the most natural thing in the world.

The Bickerton Trio disc is full of verve and excitement. It's a loud, even frenetic slice of jazz, but the leader's compositions keep on surprising. There's a dreadful tendency in free jazz for heads to be written in a who-cares manner, as if they were just launching pads for the solos, and the solos are, naturally, what we're all interested in. Bickerton won't have it, it seems: the tunes he writes have to be right, and their complex, sophisticated construction is always going to be rewarding.

If Bickerton's compositions swing like hell even as the band are dissolving swing into the deconstructed rhythms of improv, Mario Pavone's trio swings hard in a much more traditional manner. Playing Chapin's tunes can't be any easier than playing Bickerton's -- they're full of the weirdest little catches. Horrible as it is to mention Monk again in the context of piano trios, still, there's a similarity which is hard to avoid. They sound simple enough, until you realise they're not: they're fiendishly complicated, but made from really very simple materials. Just as there's a kind of reverse-logic to Monk tunes which makes them so counter-intuitive to play, so Chapin, in his more lushly Romantic way, has put some nasty little hooks into these pieces to catch out the unwary.

Pianist Madsen absolutely *launches* himself into these performances. He seems to love the tunes, and know them inside-out; he just presses the keys down and out comes this forceful, slick, whirling music. Make no mistake, this stuff is much, much tamer than what Bickerton's trio plays, but Madsen's energy, constrained as it is within Chapin's structures, just boils to get out. And sometimes, as jazz groups often do, they abandon the changes and turn freestyle, becoming, briefly, as wild and fiery in their own way as anyone this side of Cecil Taylor.

Wilson and Pavone do more than take care of business in the rhythm department. Although wedded firmly to bebop time, they have an enormous flexibility and they can loosen up the seams of Chapin's compositions to the point where they seem to billow out, mis-shapen but airbourne. They're an impressive trio indeed, and Chapin's compositions could hardly have found a more sympathetic or a more imaginative home.

Two piano trios, then, and two different approaches to the medium. Bickerton playing his own compositions, doing something edgy and demanding, and pulling it off most of the time. On top form, the Bickerton trio's album is triumphant, but there are low points, too, as there so often are in this kind of music. Pavone, on the other hand, plays it safer but gets consistently good results. Which to prefer is largely a matter of taste; both records are hugely enjoyable.

Richard Cochrane

Beins/Davies/Wastell: The Sealed Knot

(Confront: FRONT06)

Burkhard Beins (drums), Rhodri Davies (harp), Mark Wastell (cello)

Breschand/Doneda/Zbinden: L'Intense

([For4Ears](#): CD1138)

Helene Breschand (harp), Michel Doneda (soprano sax), Gerald Zbinden (electric guitar)

Two trios representing the younger generation of chamber improvisers in London, Berlin and Paris and both, coincidentally, featuring harpists who take their instrument out of its traditional role as prettifier, index of the Romantic and the romantic alike, a veritable Liberace of an instrument.

Davies and Wastell have been working together for some years now, in various combinations but most visibly in the trio IST with Simon H Fell. Those who know IST's music will find much common ground in this single, twenty-minute piece (the CD is priced at 6GBP), although the addition of Beins and removal of Fell has obvious consequences. The percussionist has the usual range of objects -- clanking chains, rattles and so on -- which improv drummers need these days, and he never sounds like a conventional kit player. And Fell is hardly a straight notes man, playing a lot with textures, percussive sounds, scrapes and squeaks and thumps so, all in all, you might expect this trio to be business as usual for Davies and Wastell.

Yet still, there are big differences in the group dynamic here, and it works quite differently. IST tend to fill their space with multi-layered sound, however, quietly they might work; the trio with Beins uses silence and near-silence far more, sounding more clearly than usual the tribute to Cage which is there in everything the string players seem to do. Not that this music has long silences, nor that not much is going on here. This is certainly not minimal or lowercase music, not really. It's just that there's a great sense of open space here, and a willingness -- shared with IST, but more pronounced here -- to do not to much, and to let the sounds be themselves. That might be down to the wonderfully wet acoustic of the All Saints Church in which this was recorded, but more likely it's Beins's impact on the group coming through.

For those who don't know their IST and are hazy on what all of this means, here we have a trio of improvisors taking a lead from Webern and, to a lesser extent, the post-Webern school, weaving understated but very active music using almost exclusively "extended" techniques rather than straight notes-playing. Actually, there's some lovely note-based music about ten minutes in, but it doesn't last long. Nothing does; this music is extremely dynamic, although it's easy to be fooled by the relatively low volumes. As with almost everything these guys do, this is worth seeking out, and Confront, a very small-scale label run by Wastell, is a project worth supporting.

As for the harpists, well, Davies very rarely sounds as if he's playing a harp at all; Breschand takes the traditional sound of the instrument as her starting-point rather than as something to be annihilated, playing "straight" for most of this disk. One can't say the same for Doneda, a player who becomes more impressive with every release, notwithstanding some rather negative things this writer had to say about his [Anatomie des Clefs](#) a year ago. The saxophonist has an extreme approach to his instrument, and often it's hard to tell what is hard-won technique and what is accident, but his ability to work in small-group settings is extraordinary.

Here, his gargling, strangled voice is pitched between Breschand's thoughtful atonalities on the one hand and the slightly muffled roar of Zbinden's axe on the other. Zbinden plays some smart stuff, but it's his tendency to shroud it in a haze of distortion which is initially off-putting but ultimately rather satisfying. He becomes something of a force of nature, a lightening-storm backdrop to the strange meeting of Breschand and Doneda.

Indeed, it's surprising that these three have anything to say to one another at all, but they collaborate with considerable verve. Sometimes the easy option is taken -- "Espace Champs" is an extended piece of mood-music which sounds like it came straight off the score to some Hollywood sci-fi movie -- but even then the results are very pleasant. When the group really gets going, Doneda comes on like Evan Parker, what with his circular breathing and complicated timbral distortions, pushing the later further than Parker ever has, which is no slur on Parker and which is, indeed, part of the reason why Doneda can be hit-and-miss.

At those times, when Doneda's really hitting, Breschand plays almost like a double bass and Zbinden like a drummer; it's hard to explain how, exactly, but this trio of strange bedfellows turns into a free jazz trio and really cooks it up. One couldn't expect them to do it all the time, naturally, especially since this group isn't a jazz trio and their music superficially has a great deal in common with the refried high Modernism of Beins/Wastell/Davies. Yet there it is: the second half of "Temps Nodal" is a blistering fireball of pure New York loft preacher-man wailing, or rather a simulacrum of it, blasted into the 21st century and the centre of postmodernism with all its energy and complexity very much intact. This is a patchy record, but the poor patches are good, and the good patches are truly excellent.

Richard Cochrane

Niels Viggo Bentzon: Solo Piano Improvisations

([Av-Art](#): AACD1004)

Niels Viggo Bentzon (piano, prepared piano)

This is a strange proposition indeed. 26 pieces lasting around 40 seconds each, followed by three at around 15 minutes each. That's odd enough, but there's more. Bentzon works in a tonal sound-world of extremely simple, but often slightly surprising harmonies; gentle dissonances creep in, but nothing like you might expect from a composer who premiered in 1939 and worked in a university throughout the heyday of Modernism. What you get here is very subtle statements of themes, most of which might just as well have come from Brahms, except that they go nowhere, hanging in the air like unaffected sketches which never develop into paintings.

That is, the first 26 tracks do this. The extended pieces -- he calls them "symphonic variations", with a little justification -- are less interesting, if less hard to understand, too. The first and third of these are marred by absolutely terrible preparations, turning a resonant grand piano into a buzzing, plastick mess which seriously grates on the ears and seems not to affect Bentzon's playing one iota. That playing is reasonably intelligent, but really it's the sound of a university professor doodling at the keyboard. His technique is sure enough, if rudimentary compared with other improvising pianists, but his overall grasp on the longer pieces is slight. The middle movement, which leaves the piano *au naturel*, is more successful because Bentzon manages to hang onto an idea and develop it rather than moving from one motif, through variations, to another, to another, and another.

If he had recorded sixty or seventy pieces lasting under a minute, this would be a disk of rather outrageous novelty, and a peculiarly listenable one at that. Perhaps those "symphonic variations" are there to add classical legitimacy to the project, perhaps they're just another side of Bentzon's musical personality. Either way, this is a very long way from the avant garde, and it's hard to see just who is going to enjoy it. Certainly not the improvised music camp, who have plenty of top-notch pianists to choose from already, any of whom would send Bentzon scurrying from the stage. And not, probably, the classical community, which either has altogether more ascerbic tastes or prefers its composers long dead.

Richard Cochrane

PUT: Umlaut

([Nur Nicht Nur](#): CD1000425)

Birgit Ulher (trumpet), Ulrich Phillipp (bass), Roger Turner (percussion)

Beresford, Coombes, Smith & Day: Three and Four Pullovers

([Emanem](#): 4038)

Steve Beresford (toys, electronics etc), Nigel Coombes (violin, electronics), Roger smith (guitar), Terry Day (percussion, alto saxophone, cello, mandolin)

Peter Niklas Wilson, in his sleeve notes to PUT's CD, makes the useful point that the casuistry and lack of pretension of musicians like these can distract from the enormous technical effort of playing this sort of music. Because improv people tend to eschew muso posturing and glamorous images, they can appear as if they've just turned up and decided -- why not? -- to mess about with their instruments a bit.

This isn't helped by the visual element either: jeans and baggy jumpers in the back rooms of unappealing venues are bad enough, but playing toys and household objects alongside a rather basic-looking drum kit is beyond the pale for most people. Why doesn't Roger Turner play "properly"? Is it because he can't? Well, no, it isn't, as an even marginally attentive listener through this disk will tell you. Turner is a striking drummer, with great command of dynamics and a wonderful range of off-the-cuff paradiddles, pattering around the kit with huge, restless energy. And, although it's a joy to watch him in the flesh, hearing him disembodied is a different experience, revealing the deep concentration which lies at the heart of his style.

Ulrich Phillips has an impressive scope to his playing, switching easily from New Music complexity to jazzy lines to sound-based techniques with enormous confidence, an essential attribute for this kind of playing and one this trio demonstrates throughout the two sessions documented here. Birgit Ulher, too, brings forceful character to her music, made in large part of breath/mouth noises and extreme wah-wah effects. Her playing is sketchy and gestural, but in an appealing way which works.

Playing this kind of music is difficult in so many ways: technically, financially, logistically, psychologically. This is one of those recordings which shows what it can be like when everything is right. It's an example of the purest kind of free improv, a music which doesn't sound like jazz or new classical but which fits exactly and entirely into its own genre. Against those who don't believe that free improvisation is a fully-fledged genre as well as a technique, this would be an excellent witness to call.

Another would be the music of the Three Pullovers (Beresford, Coombes and Smith) and the Four Pullovers (the same, with Day); recorded a quarter of a century before Umlaut's sessions, this is straight from its ancestral gene pool. The Pullovers lineups are reminiscent of John Stevens's SME, but the music is quite different. It sounds alien and somewhat aloof, as if it knows it will not be understood, like a Latin mass. There is something decidedly sinister, even threatening, about this music, something which gives fright simply by virtue of its unyielding strangeness, all of which is perhaps exacerbated by the detached experience of listening to it on CD. The jokey track titles and the gawky band-name only make the whole thing more grotesque.

Far more than with PUT, it is almost impossible to attribute any given sound to any particular Pullover. The music here really embraces noise and texture, and strives to avoid repetition, predictability or the familiar. Of course, by that very token, much of this sounds quite familiar now, but that just means that the cleverness behind the music is more accessible to us than it must have been back then. Make no mistake, this is smart music which never sounds anarchic, never sounds like an art-school pose. Very cool, often nerve-jangling stuff.

Richard Cochrane

Berger/Blackwell: Just Play

([Emanem](#): 4037)

Karl Berger (vibes, balafon, darbuka), Edward Blackwell (drums)

Ed Ware's Tree

(Ed Ware: 4037)

Joe Fiedler (trombone), Jerome Harris (guitar), Pete McCann (guitar), Edward Ware (drums)

Just Play offers a truly delicious opportunity to relish seven duets by two legendary percussionists, recorded one spring night in New York State in 1976. These improvisations pair xylophones with membranophones to create throbbing rivers of sound which seem, like the West African music which inspired both men, to spin on forever. It's as if the performers simply open a window at the beginning of each piece and close it at the end, such is the sense of movement around a still point in these hypnotic performances.

As ever, Blackwell has impeccable swing, but what's really striking here is the funkiness of the playing, the way the accent always lands squarely on what might or might not be the "one", a firm rhythmic base in this mainly metreless music. The CD suggests "File under: New Music/Free Jazz", but this sounds unlike any kind of free jazz you might usually think of. Relaxed, swinging and bouncing, it's a jam session from heaven, in audibly intimate surroundings. It was issued on vinyl in 1978 by a company called Quark, and it's good to see it available again, and in such a reliable catalogue. Emanem are, after all, best known for their issues of music by British improvisors, especially John Stevens. This is a world away, but there are (tenuous) commonalities, and one hopes it will remain long in the catalogue.

To compare such a recording with that just released by Ed Ware on his own label would be fatuous and, anyway, it wouldn't tell us much, but there's a certain similarity of ethos which makes this writer imagine himself often wanting to hear the other of these records after hearing either one. There's a similarly laid-back quality and sense of the rhythms rolling out in their own good time.

One suspects that Ware owes much to Blackwell, in fact, and his funky syncopations, cut with African riffs and polyrhythms, strongly call the master to mind. The compositions here -- for so there are, making these extremely different pieces structurally from those played by Blackwell and Berger -- are mainly simple, and best when they are. "Reflections" is an example of a piece with too much on the charts; these guys aren't Very Very Circus and oughtn't to forget it. Still, though, the majority of the pieces here are sketches filled in in real time with verve and good humour.

The unusual line-up tends to highlight the guitarists rather than Fiedler, surprisingly enough, despite the fact that the two string players appear together only once and otherwise share out the tracks. Neither is particularly exciting here, but both are okay as long as they steer clear of the distortion pedal which, as is its wont, does sometimes make things go a little pear-shaped. Still, Harris has some nice moves and McCann knows how to string a solo together. Fiedler's infrequent solos, on the other hand, are well worth listening for.

Overall, however, it's not the individual contributions which stay with you. The trio sound is most important, and above all the pulsing rhythm maintained by Ware, who's mixed somewhat louder than a drummer usually would be, and to good purpose.

Richard Cochrane

Matt Turner: The Mouse That Roared

(Meniscus: MNSCS002)

[Matt Turner](#) (cello)

Michael Bisio & Eyvind Kang: MBEK

(Meniscus: MNSCS005)

Michael Bisio (bass), Eyvind Kang (violin)

Matt Turner puts a lot of energy into these seven improvisations, recorded live way back in 1997 and only now seeing the light of day on the new (and already impressive) Meniscus label. His style incorporates many of the so-called "extended techniques" you'd expect to see at a contemporary cello festival (where this *ig* took place), but structured in rather direct ways, with none of the disregard for large-scale forms which is so common in improvised music.

Not that this music seems to be governed by actual large forms of any kind; it's just that it proceeds in an orderly fashion, developing an idea and then moving away from it and into a new area with deliberate clarity. The almost discursive quality of these pieces makes them very accessible, and they're certainly imaginative and enjoyable. Still, there's a little something missing, and at times it feels a like avant improv by numbers. Many listeners will enjoy this record, but few will find it truly arresting in the way that less genteel improv can be.

Turner would almost certainly fare better with other musicians, where their surprise interventions would disturb what sounds like a mind with an inclination towards tidiness, and what he would produce in such a setting might be very good indeed. Certainly the duo of Bisio and Kang hit some stratospheric highs on their CD, *Mbek*. Kang will be known to many readers as a violinist of eclectic but always exciting vision, a young player who will only become better-known in future years; the lesser-known Bisio turns out to be something of a force of nature on the bass, and the two together make fearsome music.

Although the highlight of their album is the first track, a soaring, unashamedly Romantic piece called *Seraphic Light*, there are plenty of great moments and throughout. Kang's interest in musics from around the world comes across many times over, and Bisio sounds interested and educated enough to follow him, although he generally seems to prefer surging around arco, creating a truly vast sound from the bass through which Kang effortlessly slices.

Inevitably, there are bits which falter, floundering around trying to get back on track. That's in the nature of improvisation, and while Turner avoids these and turns in a performance of great coherence, he does seem to lack for a partner to make things a little more dangerous and throw down a few challenges. That's just the sort of thing Bisio and Kang do well together, and the results are excellent.

[Richard Cochrane](#)

Adam Bohman: Last Orders

(Mycophile: SPOR03)

Adam Bohman (various instruments and objects), Jonathon Bohman (various objects)

Adam Bohman is one of a relatively new generation of performers who seem to play everything and nothing; people who play things, bits and bobs, just stuff, whatever's around. There's a violin, but it's stuck to a table and attacked with blunt instruments. Surrounding it are a plethora of domestic and more exotic things wired up to contact mikes and struck, rubbed, chafed, chivvied, bothered and caused by other means to resonate. Bohman hunches studiously over his table, as if it housed a collection of artefacts in the British Museum.

The noises which one can make with household objects and weirdly mutilated instruments are well-known and documented. Further, it is a striking idea that one might use common household objects to make art, elevating them to the status of that most fetishised of tools, the musical instrument. But the act of playing music on a toy telephone has, like Duchamp's urinal, lost its ability to constructively shock. Now we are left with the question of whether or not, on this occasion, good music is being made from these raw materials.

The answer is resoundingly in the affirmative. Bohman has a vast array of effects at his disposal, and he is as much a virtuoso as one can be on wine glasses and springs. Eschewing the usual tendency of the tabletop musician towards abstract, gestural percussion, he has created here eight soundscapes each of which has its own distinctive feel, its own inner logic. Some change and evolve over their usually moderate length. Some are static, ambient textures which emerge and then die away again. They are never boring and never leave you wondering why a particular musical route has been taken; they are, in other words, remarkably accessible.

Also unlike other practitioners, Bohman prefers to disguise the sources of his sounds. He is not so interested, it would appear, in the conceptual possibilities of making music with mass produced plastic widgets while considering the eminent violin suitable for the job only after extensive and rather brutal modifications involving nails, bits of wood and crocodile clips. Instead of drawing attention to the uniqueness of his materials, he prefers to foreground their conventional musicality. Not that this is "conventional" in any mainstream sense, but what Bohman does with objects echoes what is being done with electronics and (to a lesser extent) with classical ensembles in their respective avant gardes. At the same time, the pieces on this album sound like nothing else, and one can only assume that their coherence and common elements are down to the fact that they sound like Adam Bohman.

What might be surprising is the fact -- sensibly withheld from the sleeve notes -- that these pieces started life as backing tracks, to which Bohman would presumably add an additional layer when performing live. While there is fun to be had for the bedroom improviser here, these tracks also stand alone as perfectly self-sufficient, and perhaps their genesis has leant them the economy and unflustered contemplativeness which considerably enriches them.

Richard Cochrane

Fiedler/Koen/Ware: 110 Bridge St

([CIMP](#): 185)

Joe Fiedler (trombone), Ben Koen (reeds), Ed Ware (drums)

High Desert Duo: Inside the Landscape

([Zerx](#): 026)

Kurt Heyl (trombone, voice, cornet, percussion), Dave Nielsen (drums, reeds, vibes, percussion)

Bonefied: Trombone Revenge

([Zerx](#): 018)

J A Deane (tenor trombone, bass flute, shakuhachi, percussion), Steve Feld (trombones, euphonium, sousaphone, text), Kurt Heyl (tenor trombone, flutes, percussion, voice), Gary Sherman (trombones, "flugelbone", tuba), Jefferson Voorhees (drums, percussion), Mark Weaver (tuba, tenor trombone)

The trombone was there right at the start of jazz -- before the saxophone, certainly -- but we still don't think it's cool. There are few famous jazz bone men, and none of them are household names. Oddly, that's meant that many players in the various free improv "communities" (whatever that means) have been attracted to it. It's a viable, versatile instrument with a real jazz history and great potential for extended techniques but a well-developed, clearly-defined set of conventional ones. Little wonder, then, that it seems to be more widely adopted now than ever.

The players associated with Zerx were bound to be part of this, I suppose, because Zerx has long been interested in the intersection of early twentieth century musics like blues, honkey tonk and folk with the avant garde (they probably don't even call it that). The trombonist could get to the very heart of the gutbucket and was, of course, literally to be found on the tailgate from time to time. Well, prepare to be surprised, then, because while their releases do have some connections with that world, they're not on open display here.

Bonefied are a mainly-trombone and almost-all-brass ensemble playing sometimes humorous, often rather funky improvisations. They must be a blast live, and this loud, brash recording captures much of what's attractive about the trombone. It's also nice to hear instruments like the sousaphone and euphonium cropping up here, instruments created for, and limited mainly to, military marching bands, a tradition strongly drawn on in this music without it ever being overpowering. Fear not: there are no Sousa cover versions here (it might have been fun to include one, but it would have been a bit obvious, too), and the improvisations, while rooted in free jazz, are often sometimes energetic, making for an extremely likable record.

J A Dean's solo disk is as a different a kettle of fish as you can imagine. The electronics, to be fair, are very strong here, with long, evolving drones dominating the music, but this still purports to be a trombone album (there's even a picture of the thing on the cover), albeit one which sounds nothing like trombones. The pulsating soundscapes will be a bit new-agey for many readers' tastes, but it's an interesting CD of well-executed concert improvisations using electronics which are, presumably, controlled in part by trombone. The first track, an expansive half-hour-long panorama, is probably the best of the lot, and reaches an impressive white-out of rock-inspired noise.

The High Desert Duo's is another non-trombone trombone record, really, given that each of the duo members play at least five different things and only one of those things, in one case, is a trombone, played by Bonefied member Heyl. Duos like this can be awfully annoying: nobody, but nobody, is a really good drummer *and* reeds player, for example, and doubling up like this looks suspiciously like an artificial injection of variety designed to mask an indifferent talent.

Heyl is a really imaginative trombonist with plenty of swagger and raconteurship which mostly make up for a slight technical deficit. Nielsen isn't much of a drummer, and it's a shame he feels the need to play the things from time to time. He sounds reasonably confident on bass clarinet and plays some nice stuff on the vibes, though, especially alongside Heyl's unlisted recorder, wooden flute or similar on the effective 12/30/99#2 (they're all titled this way, something to be encouraged).

Heyl has some limited extended techniques under his belt, mainly vocalised sounds and extreme tongued articulations, but his conventional playing is pretty lazy. The ideas are there, and very promisingly so, but he just can't quite nail them when he needs to. That makes this a sometimes frustrating recording, although there are really pleasing moments, too, and the overall approach of risk-taking and searching is impressive, if not always successful. Fortunately, the music is played as seventeen short pieces, so it's easy to find favourite bits.

No technical worries with the CIMP set, which has Fiedler's eloquent trombone partnered by Koen's equally smooth-talking sax. This is far more conventional free jazz, of course, and it isn't fair to compare their chops directly with the High Desert Duo's -- free improv has never required the straight technique which free jazz

does, one of the easiest ways to discriminate between the two styles of playing. Still, though, it has to be said that the feeling that one is in safe hands here is rather reassuring.

Again, the pieces here are concise and to-the point, but in contrast to either of the other CDs reviewed here, this one uses a small degree of composition to create starting-points for each improvisation, just as free jazz groups usually do. Sometimes these fairly simple melodic "hooks" sound a little odd, as if shoved into the music because that's the piece which is being played, only to be dealt with cursorily and abandoned for the real business at hand. Still, there are some good moments: the composed section of the title track, for example, makes fine use of overtones and when Koen comes back for a solo with a clean, clear tonal line the contrast is beautiful, not jarring.

In all, this is a very successful trio set. Neither Fiedler nor Koen is a flashy player, but they have a poise in their playing and an admirable focus to their improvisations; Ware, meanwhile, plays with great verve, although one suspects he might have felt happier if a bass player were present. As it is, he has a lot of work to do; fortunately, he gets on and does it, and fills out the sound rather well. What's most important, though -- and this is something they share very strongly with the High Desert Duo and Bonefied -- is the "feeling of warmth and communal spirit" they refer to in a brief sleeve note. That sense of co-operation and mutuality which pervades improvised music is well demonstrated by any of those releases. It seems that, in the early twenty-first century, the trombone has many voices, probably as many as there are trombonists, so that the paradox within this music -- that it's as individualist as that, and yet as collective as it is, too -- will continue to perplex us for a while yet.

Richard Cochrane

Bonehouse: Click

([Nerve Technologies](#) : nerve001)

Phil Morton (guitar, treatments), Phil Hargreaves (saxophones, flute)

Morton and Hargreaves make a joyfully gritty noise on this first release from Liverpool-based Nerve Technologies label. The two of them have been working together for some time, and you can tell; they bounce off each other well, allowing ideas to flit between them and fearlessly pushing the music forward.

Hargreaves is a free jazzer with a wide range of high-volume squeaks and squeals in his arsenal, but he doesn't rely on them to do all the work for him. Playing more conventionally than many in this kind of free improv, he clearly enjoys using patterns of notes in his music as well as abstract sounds. If the occasional crack between these two approaches is noticable, it's because he gets it right so often. Perhaps this is down to the fact that his imagination is so febrile and hyperactive, never wanting to stay in one place for long, with an absolute antipathy to aimless noodling. The pair have a nice knack of changing the music's direction quickly and with apparent ease, cutting a loud passage to a whisper, or allowing a drone-based section to become suddenly pointillistic. These changes always feel logical, which make the seven pieces on this release very varied and very listenable indeed.

Morton uses preparations extensively. Since it's almost impossible to come up with anything really new in terms of prepared guitar sounds any more, his playing can hardly be accused of gimmickry. Going with the prepared-piano sounds which come from wedging things between or under the strings, Morton proceeds to play these preparations rather than just let them speak for themselves, manipulating the sound of each note without resorting to electronic over-processing. Although he's very much in the accompanying role for much of this disc, he fills that role admirably and contributes a great many ideas of his own. It's nice to hear him stretch out (as on "Mortal", for instance) but his less up-front role shouldn't be perceived as a less crucial one.

Where the full-on quality which some of this playing has can be hectic in some musicians' hands, it isn't here. The reason is that everything fits together so well. The reason us lazy journalists haven't picked up on Morton and Hargreaves before is probably that they're not based in London. That kind of parochialism just isn't sustainable; it risks ignoring too many fine players. This is a very promising start for Nerve Technologies, and a release from two musicians to watch out for in the future.

Richard Cochrane

Paolo Botti Quintet: Leggende Metropolitane

(Caligola: 2035-2)

[Paolo Botti](#) (viola), Alessandro Bosetti (soprano sax), Marina Ciccarelli (trombone), Tito Mangialajo Rantzer (bass), Filippo Monico (drums)

Paolo Botti's compositions are strongly bebop-influenced, but the group has deep roots in free jazz and improv, too, and the resulting combination is the foundation of this varied music. Indeed, it's becoming a cliché when applied to Italian jazz, but there's a wide range of influences here, spanning most of jazz and also some Mediterranean musics. This mix, or one very like it, has been successful for many groups in the past, and to it Paolo Botti adds his own particular vision.

The one thing this music does consistently is swing. There's plenty for those with more traditional leanings to latch onto, and it's not thrown away the minute the solos start as so often happens with this sort of thing. Although the soloists are all capable of quite abstract playing, the music most often calls for something rather more conventional. This gives them a real discipline, and the results are some cracking solos.

Botti is a particularly impressive player, and the one here who exhibits the strongest connections with Italian folk traditions. Bosetti and Ciccarelli form a solid horn section and take their solos with breezy intelligence. Rantzer can strut or gracefully walk as the need arises; Monico is a fine player who readers may know from the Takla series of recordings, and he drives everything which happens here.

Overall, one is reminded of Steve Lacy or perhaps John Wolf Brennan's Pago Libre project. There's a sunny disregard for categories here, but it's locked into a format which ensures we get more than a mere stylistic collage. Smart, funky new jazz which engages at more than one level.

Richard Cochrane

Ned Bouhalassa: Aerosol

([Diffusion i Media](#) : IMED9840)

Ned Bouhalassa (electroacoustic compositions)

Bouhalassa is something of a bright young thing in Canada's electroacoustic scene. And, as befits such a position, he shies away from the academic pigeonhole in favour of something more eclectic and more modern-sounding. The bio says he's influenced by Nirvana, Sonic Youth and Public Enemy. I can hear you cringing already; these obvious names conjure an image of an ivory-tower academic trying to get with-it, like your teachers dancing at the school disco. In fact, such influences are very much submmerged in a well-developed musical imagination.

The first track, "Jets", will serve as an example of his approach. It's very much object-oriented; self-contained events move around, develop, overlap and re-appear in an open field. Very effective it is too, and completely abstract, although there are moments which have a more conventional musical texture. The composer astutely identifies these as "nostalgic", perhaps giving some insight into his relationship with those influences from popular music – and, in a coup of meta-meta-humour, one can even catch a sample of rhythmic, 70s-style robotic speech halfway through "Attraction" which strongly echoes the Beastie Boys' "Intergalactic", itself a tribute to the age of Space Invaders and Old Skool Hip Hop. Whether this specific reference is intentional or not, this complex, textured, unromantic use of recognisable elements from other musics is typical of the rest of the disk.

Bouhalassa says something revealing in his comments on another track, "Move 1", when he refers to the "exchange or contrast between the recognizable (stable) and the unknown (unstable)". Thinking of movement in terms of a series of exchanges between stability and instability, a balancing act of a dynamic equilibrium, is helpful when applied to all kinds of music, but most explicitly to music like this. Objects develop their own momentum, shifting from stable points to points of transition, with constant, mostly quite natural ease. Nothing stays still for long – and of course, this being music, nothing is ever absolutely static otherwise the piece would be finished – but different degrees of stability can be found.

To think of these sounds as objects is also helpful; they are objects which can explode, collapse, propagate, dissipate, emerge anywhere, combine with one another and produce weird hybrids. Bouhalassa seems most fascinated by the idea of sonic movement, the concept that a sound can become an object which moves in a conceptual space (we are not talking here about the stereo field, of course). It's an interest which produces difficult music, certainly, and not stuff which follows the conventional musical lines of development. Without conceding that this is "ideal chill-out music" – it's too surprising, it buffets you and comes at you from strange angles, shouting "boo" – it's certainly absorbing.

Richard Cochrane

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GRAHAM BOWERS -- Transgression (Red Wharf: RWCD002)

Annie Billington (Cello), Graham Bowers (Vocals, Dulcimer, Clarinet, Saxophone, Keyboards, Guitar), Peter B Gallagher (Guitar, Keyboards, Vocals), Mary Heathcote (Vocals), William Henshall (Vocals), Jim Keddle (Percussion), Mark J Porter (Saxophone)

This is the central panel of Bowers' multimedia triptych, following last year's *Of Mary's Blood* and to be completed by *Eternal Ghosts*. Each musical part is accompanied by a triptych of paintings, and there is also some sculpture involved somewhere, although no information is forthcoming as to where one might see the sculpture or what it might look like. If this is conceptual work, as one must assume that it is, it leaves its audience completely in the dark, forced to guess at its intentions, and this is no bad thing in an artworld which wants everything neatly packaged.

The piece begins on the kind of drone beloved of composers like Berio -- a constant soundscape in which a lot goes on, and which returns in various forms throughout the work's fifty minutes. Different textures constantly emerge, and the first four minutes or so hold the attention rigorously, despite nothing much appearing to go on. Then, with the appearance of some more up-front percussion and excellent guitar, the piece builds to its first, extremely violent crescendo. Bowers' work is all about this kind of psychological flagellation, using harsh timbres for dramatic effect in a kind of mental theatre of cruelty.

Surrealism is, indeed, Bowers' *modus operandi*. The accompanying paintings are lumpy creations in the Dali school, all painted on black as if to signify images rising out of the subconscious. They are not, if the truth be told, awfully good, although the first of the *Transgression* and *Eternal Ghosts* series are suitably unsettling. The music, by association, is already dealing with surrealist issues, issues about the subconscious and about memory, before a note hits the score paper.

The voices emerge from the music almost imperceptibly, strongly reminiscent of Jewish cantillation but with a drifting, groaning quality and surrounded even when fully-formed by a halo of nightmarish effects. In groups, the sound becomes close to that of Ligeti's choral works, something nasty always seeming to emerge from the ensemble murk. Then, at around the halfway mark, the voices disappear again, giving way to instrumental passages which are intense but oddly ambient, like a soundtrack indicating that something bad is going to happen when no clues as to its nature appear on screen -- exactly the kinds of connections, one suspects, that Bowers wants to be making.

The surrealist project is further undergirded by the use of familiar sounds, whether they be little samples from Classical recordings or, near the end, what might be a child's plastic trumpet. Bowers is helped in all this by his long-standing connections with music for the theatre, and the approach and many of the techniques transfer easily.

It would be papering over the cracks to say that the piece does not occasionally lose its footing, or to pretend that it never falls back on schlock-horror cliché. Its climax, in particular, is entered into with remarkably ham fists; in a piece like this, a conclusion has to feel as if it has emerged from the music itself. Simply upping the volume and bringing back the guitar and percussion will not do. Despite this, however, *Transgression* is a work which repays close listening, and there is precious little music out there which, after it has finished, leaves you a little afraid to go to the bathroom without switching on the light.

Richard Cochrane

Richard Bowers: Nocturne

([Simulacrum](#): No number)

[Richard Bowers](#) (composition)

These three extended electroacoustic compositions are superficially a part of the "dark ambient" tradition, if tradition it is. They're full of incredibly slow-moving textures, brooding industrial grinding and horror-movie clankings and scrapings. That, at least, is what's on the surface.

Even dealt with on that level, this is very successful music. Its determinedly minimal approach helps here; it seems to try to do just one or two things at a time, and that works in its favour by intensifying those specific effects. While there is an eeriness in all three pieces, it's not an easy, Hollywood "spookiness" but a gradual, creeping sense of unease.

If that was all there was in these pieces, they would make nice soundtrack material but little else. There is, however, a lot more under the surface. What's nice is that this "more" isn't the result of additional sounds in the mix, but of the choice of sounds and the procedures they're involved in. Just about anyone can create complexity out of maximalistic, multi-layered events; simultaneity, while it can be exciting, can also be terribly lazy. It's much harder to get the right kind of complexity out of electronic music, a complexity which doesn't lean on simple complexification.

What Bowers does, then, is picks his sounds with care. The most important reference, for all three works but especially "Nocturne" and "Procession" is choral music. He samples choral music and distorts it to create some of his sounds, but that's just a clue to what's really going on. His drawn-out metallic sounds initially recall bowed gongs and cymbals, but on reflection their proximity to the spectral voices of Ligeti's choral works, or even Byrd's, becomes surprisingly obvious. These sounds are so much a part of this music that the connection with vocal music seems undeniably important, not just a touch of local colour.

The tradition of choral music, of course, is strongly associated with ritual, whether religious or secular. Bowers makes that connection, too. Again there's an obvious clue; this time it's the title of the third work here, "Procession". That piece is the most obviously ceremonial, with its largo rhythm on a gong-like sound pacing as slowly as a high church processional under the sweeping, agonisingly gradual glissandi of his inhuman chorus. "Procession" also makes reference, in its sound-world, to Chinese Gagaku music, plucked koto-like sounds punctuating, again oh-so-slowly, the gongs and endlessly reverberating bells.

If the slowness of his music sounds ponderous, however, it isn't, and that's one of its great virtues. Because of the relative lack of density, there's an airiness here which can summon up quite different images from the oppressively stuffy formalities to which Bowers is obviously indebted. That's most obvious in the central "...of Landscapes", with its predominantly high-pitched sounds and its acousmatic recollections of natural sounds, the rush of the ocean, the wind and the rustle of leaves, but these features are in all three pieces, even "Procession".

It's that duality which makes this music so interesting. Far from crude picture-painting, Bowers works his different textures together to produce open, re-interpretable compositions which resist a closed reading. The uncertainty this produces leads to stuff you can listen to again and again, and always find something new in it. While music which deals with extreme slowness and dissonance can often be unremittingly harsh or just plain boring, Bowers, through careful selection, always avoids the grinding unpleasantness which can come with the territory.

[Richard Cochrane](#)

Brasserie Trio: Musique Mecanique ([Leo](#): CDLR269)

Alberto Mandarinini (trumpet, flugelhorn, percussion, voice), Lauro Rossi (trombone, voice), Carlo Actis Dato (bass clarinet, tenor and baritone sax, voice)

This is a trio for whom "fun" is the operative word. That's nothing new in Italian jazz; the Instabile Orchestra, of which Dato and Rossi are both erstwhile members, has long drawn on the circus and the festival in their search for performance models, rather than the staid world of the classical concert hall. Accordingly, the Brasserie trio have performed in all kinds of odd places – their all-acoustic lineup being neatly portable – and always, it would appear, with theatrical gusto.

It's tempting to classify Dato, at least, as a "free jazz" musician, but the distinction between "free" and composed music seems to be drawn less sharply in Italy than it is in Northern Europe. Here, there's a lot of composition and many pieces have two or three different sections which crop up throughout, in contrast to the more familiar head-solos-head arrangement. It's frequently said that Dato's influences are from the folk musics of a wide range of nations, and Mandarinini seems similarly catholic in his tastes. There seems to be a genuinely integrationist approach taken by these musicians – and most others drawn from the Instabile Orchestra – which, rather than polarising an "avant garde" with popular forms, instead sees the avant garde as something which grows within tradition. It's just that, at the end of the twentieth century, you have to invent your own tradition first, that's all.

All three men play beautifully. The level of interaction here is very high, whether during solo-plus-comping sections or group improvisations. Mandarinini has a wonderfully salacious wha-wha and Rossi slides gracefully through a whole gamut of sleazy vaudeville timbres; from this core sound, they each stretch out to encompass straight playing on the one hand and "noise" techniques on the other. What they seem to enjoy most, though, is playing the tunes, because these are inevitably embellished and, if you will, jazzed up as they go along. Dato is much less of a commanding presence than on other sessions; instead, he takes an ensemble role which he contributes wonderfully.

There's not much intelligent jazz fusing composition, traditional methods, tunes you can hum and avant garde sensibilities around at the moment, and most of it seems to be coming out of Italy. Dato's "Delhi Mambo" and Geremia's "Tre Cose" of last year were wonderful documents of a kind of music-making which it's easy to forget about. Not cutting-edge, not hard-line, but hardly mainstream either, this is masterful music with a serious edge and a grin all over its face. The best comparison might be Zorn's "News for Lulu" project: fun and serious, tonal and free, composed and improvised, melodic and crazy.

Richard Cochrane

Anthony Braxton: 14 Compositions (Traditional)

([Leo](#): CDL:R259)

Anthony Braxton (reeds), Stewart Gillmor (piano, French horn, trumpet)

Braxton's work breaks down into several strands, any one of which most musicians would be proud to have made a career of, among them the compositions for classical players, the quartet work, ad hoc improv groupings and his engagement with the jazz tradition. The latter threads through his entire career, from *In the Tradition* through the standards collections and *The Charlie Parker Project*. This, however, is something different and, as far as I know, unique.

The compositions in question are jazz heads, but they're not "standards", or at least not any more. Many are blues tunes or folk songs, others swing staples which have long gone out of favour, composed on the whole during the 1920s and '30s; most will be strangers to all but specialists. They are a long way, chronologically, from Braxton's own time, an exercise in historical research even.

How does he deal with this material? Well, not the way he fillets and re-structures Bird, nor the way he respectfully breezes through post-bop standards like Dolphy's "Miss Anne". He has a fine line to walk here, because it would be too easy to pay respectful but anachronistic homage (as wonderfully done by Archie Shepp) or to descend into cheap parody, neither of which is the intention. So what you get is this: "traditional" compositions, taken mostly at a quick tempo and with all the mercurial panache of Bechet, but played pretty much straight, with solos which generally move discursively from simple tonality through more complex dissonances, like a lecture.

If this sounds tediously sententious, don't worry. Braxton is a hugely entertaining raconteur as well as a scholar, and he makes room for jokes and straightforward blowing amidst his fleet-fingered, headlong complexities. Gillmor accompanies with straight, impeccable stride throughout, except when he picks up a brass instrument. When that happens, the duo sound more like a swampy, wobbly marching band -- the sort of thing that the Art Ensemble of Chicago used to do -- and it's not always so successful. Certainly Braxton's brilliantly-polished, rapier-like solos, accompanied by Gillmore's "authentic" piano, capture the spirit of these tunes without feeling anything less than contemporary. It may not be to everyone's taste, being considerably less angular and dissonant than much of his work, but Braxton has achieved what he set out to achieve and the result is an intelligent, rewarding and enjoyable set.

Richard Cochrane

Anthony Braxton: Composition No 94 for Three Instrumentalists (1980)

([Golden Years of New Jazz](#): GY3)

Anthony Braxton (reeds), Ray Anderson (trombones, cornet, trumpet), James Emery (guitars, electronics)

This is one of the four debut releases of Leo's new offshoot, "Golden Years of New Jazz", a somewhat ironically-titled label whose intention is to remind us that free jazz has been around for a rather long time, that it's a well-established genre with famous figures, classic recordings and, yes, "golden years".

Whether 1980 was a golden year for free jazz is a moot point, but what's on this disc isn't free jazz anyway. It's a pair of performances of a semi-determinate score by Braxton which encourages musicians to improvise within a fairly flexible set of parameters. The pages of the score basically indicate densities and melodic materials of various sorts and leaves the performers to fill in the details.

Graham Lock's hugely informative notes describe this music as "a magic carpet, a warp and woof of shape and symbol". There is certainly a sense of individual musical entities being deployed here, moving in three layers, sometimes together, sometimes not. The score seems to emphasise this, with each part made up of discrete little shapes, lines and groups of notes which seem not to be closely connected together.

These highly detailed ensemble sections are heavily interspersed with duets and occasional solos. The overall effect is one found in many classical pieces of the 1980s; shifting veils of sound, sometimes dense, sometimes sparse, consisting of elements which seem to have their own inner logic. The decision to break up the trio in this way, whatever its structural reasoning -- and with Braxton, we can be sure that was there somewhere -- also makes this disc a lot more approachable than it might have been otherwise, being two unbroken performances of nearly forty minutes each.

The fact that the second performance plays the same pages of the score used in the first, but in reverse, shouldn't lead one to believe that this palindromic structure can really be detected. For example, the first performance ends with an extended trio section followed by a duet of Anderson and Emery; the second begins with a short trio section followed by an extended trombone solo. These are in fact two quite different realisations of a score designed for improvisors, and the improvisatory element is obviously very strong indeed.

Braxton's collaborators on this performance are, therefore, of great importance in ensuring its success. They certainly pull it off, with Anderson's virtuosic trombone and Emery's scribbly but always interesting guitar playing; both have a lot of tricks up their sleeves which they can bring to this ever-changing music, too. Emery's electronics are, oddly, sometimes very sophisticated and sometimes of the ray-gun-noise variety, but both sorts work fine in context.

This is a compulsory purchase of Braxton fanatics, of course, but what makes it stand out is that, yet again, it appears the Professor has created something which is quite unlike anything else in the catalogue (at least as far as this writer knows). It owes a strong debt to classical approaches, but is resolutely improvised without ever getting very close to jazz. The dynamism of this music, its interest in real-time elaboration and development of structural ideas, is impressive to say the least. Those who still doubt the importance of Braxton as a composer are strongly encouraged to hear it.

Richard Cochrane

Anthony Braxton: Knitting Factory (Piano/Quartet) 1994, Vol 2

([Leo](#): CDLR297/298)

Anthony Braxton: Piano, Marty Ehrlich (reeds), Joe Fonda (bass), Pheeroan AkLaff (drums)

Braxton on piano is a bizarre thought. His considerable reputation is built on his reed playing and his compositions for other instruments, which he generally lets others play on his behalf. His piano pieces are certainly very impressive, extraordinary even, and have a criminally neglected position in the post-war Classical repertoire, but his own piano-playing is a wholly different matter, and here he treats us to it, as a member of a jazz quartet playing standards.

It seems that Braxton's interest here is harmonic above all. He passes melodic responsibilities to Ehrlich, who gives the performane of his life, perhaps because he knows that the man comping behind him is probably the most extravagantly virtuosic saxophonist on the planet, and one of its most sophisticated musical imaginations. Abandoning melodic invention almost entirely, then, Braxton finds himself in a position to explore the harmonies of these hoary old favourites ("I Remember Clifford", "Blue Bossa", "Reincarnation of a Love Bird" and so on).

The results are, frankly, transcendently good. Hearing Braxton explore, stretch and often utterly re-form these chord changes is somehow like entering the mind of a chess grandmaster or a mathematics professor. Without necessarily understanding every step of the argument, you are dazzled by the quickness and alacrity of his choices, and of course by the sheer unlikeliness of these audacious choices actually doing the job they're supposed to do within the context of the progression, which they surely do.

This writer has not always been kind to Marty Erlich, whose playng, like David Murray's, can sound a bit free-jazz-by-numbers, but to have the chutzpah to get up on stage in such company and blow your brains out for the entire set is certainly impressive. What's more, his note-choices and the way he structures his solos are both smart and unexpected. Fonda and AkLaff, meanwhile, hold down the rhythm section duties with the flair and skill you'd expect from two such bankable names, AkLaff in particular taking palpable pleasure in Braxton's weird metrical perversions.

This release documents the second half of what must have been a devastating night of music. The sound quality is far from perfect (as Knitting Factory recordings usually are) but only the most anal of audiophiles will let that discourage them. This is an exhilaratingly intelligent rumination on bebop and the music which has been called "jazz" since.

Richard Cochrane

Anthony Braxton: Composition N.247

([Leo](#): CDLR306)

Anthony Braxton (reeds), James Fei (reeds), Matthew Welch (bagpipes)

"Ghost Trance Music" is a phrase one hears bandied about in the rather occult discourses of Braxtonologists, but this piece really makes sense of the term. Using the bagpipes not only for their sound but, it seems, their whole tradition, he creates a continuously flowing stream of notes rooted in a regular semiquaver rhythm. At the most simplistic level, this is certainly hypnotic stuff, and when one gets a way into the piece's hour-long duration, time really does seem to dilate a bit.

The three reeds mainly blend to create a thick, swirling melange, although both Braxton and Fei make soloistic statements within this framework. Two other Braxton compositions also make brief appearances. The effect, then, is of a quite minimalist framework within which other things can happen. What's particularly fascinating here is that the hierarchy this implies is reversed here. Instead of the long, flowing regular notes accompanying the solos, what actually happens is the reverse.

This makes this long piece both daunting and surprisingly affecting. On the surface of it, not much happens; a simple-looking tune is repeated, interminally, by three reed instruments. It's astonishing that something so apparently slight can yield such absorbing and fascinating music. This is not, repeat not, minimalist music; it's packed with incident.

This is helped by the line-up. Regulars will remember Fei from his [previous Leo release](#); he's a fine player with a penchant for the admixture of composition with improvisation, but it's a surprise to discover just how well he seems to understand the older man's sometimes obscure intentions. Welch is an absolute trouper, playing his intensely demanding part which requires him to hold the whole thing together but affords little opportunity for grandstanding.

The composer himself is on good form, but this really isn't music about individual performances. The Ghost Trance Musics are already setting out on a very different path from Braxton's jazz heritage, although the connection with African musics is very strong here, and in this case a fruitful alliance is formed with the Scots, too. The presence of extensive and very helpful notes is something which seems to characterise Braxton on Leo, and something very much to be encouraged, making this extraordinary music accessible even to Braxton neophytes.

Richard Cochrane

John Wolf Brennan: Moskau-Petuschki/Felix-Szenen

([Leo Lab](#): CD034)

John Wolf Brennan (piano, melodica, voice), Tscho Theissing (violin), Marion Namestnik (violin), Martin Mayes (French horn, hand horn), Lars Lindvall (flugelhorn, trumpet), Daniele Patumi (bass)

The instrumentation here is not so idiosyncratic as it may at first appear. The album breaks roughly in half, featuring two half-hour suites each performed by a quartet of Brennan, Patumi, one violinist and one brass player. The voices are used only very briefly. Each quartet plays well, mostly interpreting Brennan's music in a straightforward, no-nonsense style.

Each suite was composed for the theatre, and consists of a large number of short cues. As so often with soundtrack albums (not those albums which collect twelve unrelated pop songs under a film title), the problem is one of continuity. Disregarding one extended piece, the average length of a track here is just over fifty seconds. This music was doubtless very evocative in the theatre, but in the living room, on the stereo, the effect is of sketchy ideas, repeated once or twice and then abandoned. Sometimes the ideas return, but not in any way which might be called "development".

Little, if any, of the music here is improvised, and is largely characterised by 4/4 rhythms, simple tunes and repetition. The melodies are often beautifully arranged, and employ some striking harmonies, even if they can be rather callow in themselves. Where Brennan has previously been linked with the jazz avant garde as well as the classical fringes, this is minimal, rather folksy stuff clearly designed to augment a visual stimulus. Alone, each piece becomes a simple, brief gesture with none of the sophistication which, distracting as it may be in the theatre, would help retain interest under the headphones.

Alexander Kan, in his sleeve notes, concedes that the pieces "hardly happen on their individual level", but goes on to claim that each suite unites them, like a mosaic. Which would be all well and good, if each piece were not either (a) musically unconnected with any of the others, or (b) almost exactly the same as one of the others, or (c) made up of two of the others played at the same time. Without exception, every one of these pieces sounds as if it's going to be great for the first forty seconds. If it isn't about to finish by then, however, it is inevitably going to repeat what you have just heard without much in the way of variation. Sticking such pieces together does not of necessity produce a meaningful mosaic.

There are certainly good moments here. The second half is an improvement on the first (thirteen tracks instead of twenty two). Naturally, the longer tracks overcome many of the problems enumerated above, but there are too few of these to be able to program a satisfactory album. Mostly, they promise much but fail frustratingly to deliver. It's always a shame when promising material like this isn't worked on before committing it to CD -- the straight transfer from stage to stereo is pure laziness, and it shows.

Richard Cochrane

This review first appeared in Resonance magazine, published by [LMC](#).

John Wolf Brennan

The Well-Prepared Clavier (Creative Works Records CW1032)

The twenty four tracks on this disk cover a lot of ground, from straight solos through musique concrete and multi-layered overdubs as well as the expected prepared piano workouts, notably the "Seven Studies", which transcend the gimmick-value of preparation to produce some enjoyable pieces of music. Elsewhere, Brennan gets at the strings directly -- his use of bow-strings on the opening track is astonishing, for example, and had this listener fooled into picturing a string section until the sleeve notes gave the game away. He has a few more tricks up his sleeve, too.

The idea of accompanying oneself with recordings of squeaky door hinges sounds like a loser of an idea, the kind of thing which we joke about when we're admitting that improvised music can be funny sometimes. Miraculously, it works, the samples creating sometimes scraping loops and sometimes harsh interjections into Brennan's improvisation. So too, against all the odds, do his rhumba in 7/4 and his use of environmental recordings from Aldgate East tube station, which conjures the wonderful image of Brennan playing his piano on the platform, jamming along with the announcements and the rush of the trains.

These first seventeen tracks are studio recordings, while the eighteenth is a brief duet with Marianne Schroeder. This is enjoyable if a little tantalising, three minutes hardly being enough to satisfy even a passingly interested listener. The remainder of the disk is a live set from 1997; it's rather disconcerting to hear an announcement welcoming John Wolf Brennan to the stage nearly an hour into the recording, but perhaps this is another of his conceptual gags. In any event, this is just as successful as what precedes it, with the audience audibly recognising one of the high points -- a clever piece of lo-fi live sampling.

One sometimes gets the feeling that Brennan would like to be a blood-and-thunder player, but his whimsical Romantic streak gets the better of him. If this is a weakness, the resultant pieces are strong in spite of it, a robust wistfulness making them appealing little vignettes which sit together perfectly nicely. And occasionally he manages to pull off that alternative persona, notably on "to John C. (Age)", a very un-Cagean performance which seems to rattle the fixtures of the Queen Elisabeth Hall.

Richard Cochrane

John Wolf Brennan: Text, Context, Co-Text and Co-Co-Text

(Creative Works: CW1025)

John Wolf Brennan (piano, compositions)

Brennan's third solo piano disc unites most of the things he's known for -- rhapsodic compositions, improvisation, canny preparations and extended techniques, whimsical folk-like tunes, rather Gothic poetry and a Joycean love of ambiguity and barefaced daftness. Over the course of seventeen tracks all this could become disorientating and fragmentary, but something holds these pieces together. That something is a sophisticated Romanticism; a something with all the whistful elegance of a Byron or even a Thoreau, but with a twentieth century sense of its own complexities and contradictions

Brennan loves a good tune, and his compositions are often hummable, disastrously so for his reputation among the European avant garde. He harmonises them with neither modal washes nor jazz cycles but genuine progressions; these are pieces which modulate, which shift in and out of atonality, which build into ringing cadences. And what gives them their propulsive energy is his hard rhythmic touch. Notes seem to spring from the keyboard, and his rubato is always musical, never technical, his free rhythms striding forwards as confidently as the tricky mixed metres of "Song of the Moon".

This is a less restless disk than last year's [The Well-Prepared Clavier](#); what was fun about that disc, in part, was its manic inclusivity. Here there is much greater focus on straight, composed piano playing. Why? Perhaps because Brennan's subject is something like the construction of an alternative Irish music, a music which doesn't borrow from airs and jigs so much as from the inherent Romanticism, even sentimentality, with which the island's image is so bound up, as well, of course, as its legendary wit and literary virtuosity.

Which is not to say that Brennan romanticises the country of his birth so much as, if I have this right, that Ireland romanticises itself. It's there in Theo Dorgan's critical theory-informed spirituality (an excerpt appears in the insert) which is simultaneously academic, popular and frighteningly redolent of a kind of blood-and-soil nationalism. Brennan's music has to work its way around these contradictions, and he wisely leaves the wise-cracking experiments aside in favour of a simpler, more nuanced approach.

Not that this is joyless stuff, either. On the contrary, Brennan revels in the impossibility of his task. The result is a typically approachable listen from one of the most uncategorisable musicians around.

Richard Cochrane

John Wolf Brennan HeXteT: ...through the Ear of a Raindrop

([Leo](#) : CDLR254)

Julie Tippets (voice), Peter Whyman (bass clarinet), Evan Parker (saxophones), Paul Rutherford (trombone), John Wolf Brennan (piano, compositions), Chris Cutler (percussion)

Five of London's finest join forces to breathe life into eight of Brennan's songs, and also to jam with him in uncomposed settings. The result is an ensemble record whose only dominant voice is Julie Tippets, and then only during the straighter sections. Elsewhere, the group fuses together, overcoming its individuals' strong musical personalities to create a cohesive sound.

Brennan's setting reflect the concerns of the poems he chooses. So, Meehan's "No Go Area" is a military march, Poe is given a folk melody, Heany gets two disconsolate pastorales. A rather misogynistic Shakespeare sonnet is accompanied by an ironic striptease wail (who'd have thought that was in Parker's trick bag?), creating a careful balance between the polyphony of New Orleans and the polyphony of free improv.

Parker has often spoken of himself as a chameleon, adapting his playing to fit the demands of different situations. Many listeners know him only for his uncompromising improvisation, forgetting his work with Schlippenbach, Wheeler and, now, Brennan too. Of course, he still sounds like Evan Parker, but those who think that Conic Sections or the trio with Lytton and Guy are the beginning and the end of his work are in for a surprise. This holds true for Rutherford, too, long a co-conspirator in some of Parker's most challenging music.

Perhaps it's a perverse decision to get together a group of first-rate improvisors to perform your compositions, but Brennan is nothing if not perverse. And, as elsewhere, the perversity pays off. These are all musicians who are perfectly capable of carrying the tunes, but Brennan seems to have wanted more than that, players who will inject imagination into these actually quite simple arrangements, players who can hardly resist the temptation to interpret freely and light the music up like a pinball table.

Along with the song settings, the group also gives us five "Echos", improvisations presumably played after some of the songs. Hence after "No Go Area", you get "No Go Echo". The relationship between song and echo is not explicit, but general and vague connections of "mood" or "feel" can be discerned, perhaps simply by virtue of the overt connection made by the choice of title. In these, as elsewhere, the HeXteT play as an ensemble; "Eagle Echo" is particularly nice, with close and unfettered interplay between all concerned.

Richard Cochrane

Pago Libre: Wake Up Call

([Leo](#): CDLR272)

Tscho Theissing (violin, voice), Arkady Shilkloper (french horn, flugelhorn), John Wolf Brennan (piano, melodica), Daniele Patumi (bass)

Brennan/Coleman/Wolfarth: Momentum

([Leo](#): CDLR274) John Wolf Brennan (piano, prepared piano), Gene Coleman (bass clarinet, melodica), Christian Wolfarth (percussion)

Two releases on Leo; one an opportunity to hear an established group in a live setting, the other a new grouping and a step into what seems to be a new compositional direction for Brennan.

Pago Libre are, like many groups, even hotter in concert than they are in the studio. The sense of headlong rush, driven by nervous excitement, with which the disc opens does cool off from time to time, but it rarely vanishes; this group's intelligent, highly committed vision of jazz, complete with heads, changes and solos, is quite unlike anyone else's.

Some of these compositions are ones which have been recorded before -- "Wake up Call" and "Toccatacca", and the cerebral, seemingly through-composed ballad "Tupi-Kulai". It's interesting to hear them re-interpreted. "Wake up Call" and "Tupi Kulai" retain the arrangements which Pago Libre committed to disc on [CDLR45105](#), a joint release by Leo Records and Ballaphon from 1996. Meanwhile, "Toccatacca" and "Kabak", recorded by the quintet Shooting Stars and Traffic Lights on their [eponymous 1995 album](#), get fresh new arrangements to account for the slightly different instrumentation of Pago Libre.

Those interested in the individual musicians will find more information in the [reviews](#) of these two previous disks; Theissing, Shilkloper and Patumi are extraordinary musicians ideally suited to Brennan's fusion of bebop, free jazz, improv and world folk. Take Theissing's introduction to "Kabak"; a four-minute fiery furnace of Indo-Jewish impro-jazz which builds towards the foot-stomping theme and has the audience begging for more.

As for the compositions which haven't been committed to mica before, they have much in common with the pieces with which they share the bill. Patumi's "African Blossom" is clearly a variation on his previous "African Flower", although more diffuse, a sophisticated and delicate duet with Theissing's violin. Shilkloper's "Folk Song" is a solo cadenza of almost discursive clarity, while "Kobra" is another convoluted thread which the musicians play as if it were "Body and Soul"; it isn't, and it constantly twists and turns in unexpected directions. "Synopsis", meanwhile, is a more sedate variation on the "Wake up Call" model, with its sweet harmonies and punchy rhythms, this time with a rather sectional arrangement of solos.

Pago Libre live are evidently well worth catching, a well-drilled team which has existed for over a decade, playing a music which is simultaneously nostalgic and futuristic. In contrast, the trio of Brennan, Gene Coleman and Christian Wolfarth is new, spikey and exploratory project. While Pago Libre has the benefit of time to create something honed, this trio has the alternate virtue of not seeming to know quite what will happen next.

The disk documents what is referred to as "comprovisations in a vertical circle". Attempting to disentangle John Corbett's pretentiously obfuscating liner notes (bad news: he seems to have rediscovered Deleuze and Guattari from his grad-school days, folks; the logorrhea may never cease), it seems that there is some compositional element here, influenced by Stockhausen's conception of "moment form". The truth is that Wolfarth and Coleman are both free improvisors, with little background (as far as this writer is aware) in score interpretation, and the truth is that this sounds like a free improv album even if it's not.

The format is four duets and six trios. Of the duets, Brennan appears on two and his colleagues on three each (you work it out). Wolfarth is a percussionist in the Han Bennink school, pushing home the uneven pulses of this shifting music with still a vestige of jazz swing under his fingernails. There are moments when he seems only interested in texture, but they don't last long. Wolfarth's desire to ride the waves is too strong. He even, on "To hoo wa bo hoo", briefly strikes up a Blakey-style paradiddle which one half-expects to turn into "Blues March".

That puts him in a strong tradition of free players, although this writer finds that attachment to jazz can sometimes be a problem. However, this trio seems interested specifically in forming a connection between free jazz as played by, say, the Jimmy Guiffre trio, and the more ascetic forms of chamber improv which are now fairly common. There is a chilliness here which is very appealing, although it takes some getting used to. One could refer to it as "cold school"; it takes some of the supposedly glacial austerity of Northern European composers like Magnus Lindberg and applies it to the premise of chamber jazz.

That makes for an extremely interesting record, and a very varied one, as the three try out different strategies for making this music which is quite unlike anything else, what with the unorthodox instrumentation, the unique approaches of the players and the overall feel of the project being resolutely non-partisan.

Beins/Davies/Wastell: The Sealed Knot

(Confront: FRONT06)

Burkhard Beins (drums), Rhodri Davies (harp), Mark Wastell (cello)

Breschand/Doneda/Zbinden: L'Intense

([For4Ears](#): CD1138)

Helene Breschand (harp), Michel Doneda (soprano sax), Gerald Zbinden (electric guitar)

Two trios representing the younger generation of chamber improvisers in London, Berlin and Paris and both, coincidentally, featuring harpists who take their instrument out of its traditional role as prettifier, index of the Romantic and the romantic alike, a veritable Liberace of an instrument.

Davies and Wastell have been working together for some years now, in various combinations but most visibly in the trio IST with Simon H Fell. Those who know IST's music will find much common ground in this single, twenty-minute piece (the CD is priced at 6GBP), although the addition of Beins and removal of Fell has obvious consequences. The percussionist has the usual range of objects -- clanking chains, rattles and so on -- which improv drummers need these days, and he never sounds like a conventional kit player. And Fell is hardly a straight notes man, playing a lot with textures, percussive sounds, scrapes and squeaks and thumps so, all in all, you might expect this trio to be business as usual for Davies and Wastell.

Yet still, there are big differences in the group dynamic here, and it works quite differently. IST tend to fill their space with multi-layered sound, however, quietly they might work; the trio with Beins uses silence and near-silence far more, sounding more clearly than usual the tribute to Cage which is there in everything the string players seem to do. Not that this music has long silences, nor that not much is going on here. This is certainly not minimal or lowercase music, not really. It's just that there's a great sense of open space here, and a willingness -- shared with IST, but more pronounced here -- to do not to much, and to let the sounds be themselves. That might be down to the wonderfully wet acoustic of the All Saints Church in which this was recorded, but more likely it's Beins's impact on the group coming through.

For those who don't know their IST and are hazy on what all of this means, here we have a trio of improvisors taking a lead from Webern and, to a lesser extent, the post-Webern school, weaving understated but very active music using almost exclusively "extended" techniques rather than straight notes-playing. Actually, there's some lovely note-based music about ten minutes in, but it doesn't last long. Nothing does; this music is extremely dynamic, although it's easy to be fooled by the relatively low volumes. As with almost everything these guys do, this is worth seeking out, and Confront, a very small-scale label run by Wastell, is a project worth supporting.

As for the harpists, well, Davies very rarely sounds as if he's playing a harp at all; Breschand takes the traditional sound of the instrument as her starting-point rather than as something to be annihilated, playing "straight" for most of this disk. One can't say the same for Doneda, a player who becomes more impressive with every release, notwithstanding some rather negative things this writer had to say about his [Anatomie des Clefs](#) a year ago. The saxophonist has an extreme approach to his instrument, and often it's hard to tell what is hard-won technique and what is accident, but his ability to work in small-group settings is extraordinary.

Here, his gargling, strangulated voice is pitched between Breschand's thoughtful atonalities on the one hand and the slightly muffled roar of Zbinden's axe on the other. Zbinden plays some smart stuff, but it's his tendency to shroud it in a haze of distortion which is initially off-putting but ultimately rather satisfying. He becomes something of a force of nature, a lightening-storm backdrop to the strange meeting of Breschand and Doneda.

Indeed, it's surprising that these three have anything to say to one another at all, but they collaborate with considerable verve. Sometimes the easy option is taken -- "Espace Champs" is an extended piece of mood-music which sounds like it came straight off the score to some Hollywood sci-fi movie -- but even then the results are very pleasant. When the group really gets going, Doneda comes on like Evan Parker, what with his circular breathing and complicated timbral distortions, pushing the later further than Parker ever has, which is no slur on Parker and which is, indeed, part of the reason why Doneda can be hit-and-miss.

At those times, when Doneda's really hitting, Breschand plays almost like a double bass and Zbinden like a drummer; it's hard to explain how, exactly, but this trio of strange bedfellows turns into a free jazz trio and really cooks it up. One couldn't expect them to do it all the time, naturally, especially since this group isn't a jazz trio and their music superficially has a great deal in common with the refried high Modernism of Beins/Wastell/Davies. Yet there it is: the second half of "Temps Nodal" is a blistering fireball of pure New York loft preacher-man wailing, or rather a simulacrum of it, blasted into the 21st century and the centre of postmodernism with all its energy and complexity very much intact. This is a patchy record, but the poor patches are good, and the good patches are truly excellent.

Richard Cochrane

Peter Brotzmann: Noise of Wings

(Slask: SLACD019)

Peter Brotzmann (tenor sax, tarogato, clarinet), Peter Friis Nielsen (electric bass), Peeter Uuskyla (drums)

We all know what Brotzmann does; that astonishing burst of energy which seems to boil out of the bell of his saxophone, that extreme sensitivity masquerading as bully-boy macho antics. His is one of the most extraordinary voices on the instrument around, and although well-known, his real talents are regularly underreported because of a tendency to view his playing in terms of noise, punky high-volume confrontation and retro-Aylerisms.

Well, this disk isn't going to change that perception for those who are still in the dark about Brotzmann's towering achievements. Only one track, entitled "A Real Dilemma, This One", reminds us of his ability to play slowly, carefully, and with extreme sensitivity to the reed. As often happens, it's the tarogato which leads him into this more reflective frame of mind. But even that track is a slow-burning whiskey ballad which Brotzmann growls his way through as if looking for someone to start a fight with. That coiled energy is a part of what makes him so special; it's unlike anything else in the world, and the suspicious would do well to start here.

Elsewhere, then, the wonderfully barrel-chested sound of the Brotzmann tenor is allowed to roam free. Nielsen is a free jazz drummer, with Andrew Cyrille's ability to swing even when the pulse seems almost lost, but he's a much sparser player than that early generation with their attachments to ride cymbals still strong. He seems able to describe the rhythm of the music with the smallest of gestures; an extremely valuable player.

Uuskyla plays bass like a percussion instrument, hitting it hard and staying, for the most part, in the bottom register where pitch can come second to attack and articulation. He seems to really love playing with Nielsen -- this writer suspects they're a regular duo -- and Brotzmann audibly enjoys their company. In short, the three lock together tightly and cook.

Nobody works harder than Brotzmann, and he makes his playing partners sweat just as hard as he does. Fortunately, it seems that neither Uuskyla nor Nielsen is afraid of hard work, and they pitch in with the kind of muscular, driving free jazz which makes the reedsman feel at home. A twenty-minute piece which moves between furious blowing and gentle passages with a sense of inevitable destiny crowns an excellent and very generously filled-out CD. Fans will find it essential; if you haven't heard Brotzmann yet, here's where to get on the bus. Highly recommended.

Richard Cochrane

Misha Feigin: Both Kinds of Music

([Leo Lab](#): CD060)

Misha Feigin (balalaika, classical guitar), in duet with Elliot Sharp (dobro), Davey Williams (electric guitar), LaDonna Smith (violin, dancing on a woden box), Craig Hultgren (cello), Eugene Chadbourne (banjo, guitar)

The Bubbados: We're Really Making Music Now

([Zerx](#): 014)

Mark Weaver (tuba), Stefan Dill (guitar, trumpet), Bubba D (lap steel, bass flute, piano, drums), Mark Weber (covals, guitar, violin, harmonica), Ken Keppeler (violin, mandolin, banjo, accordion, harmonica)

"Both kinds of music" refers, of course, to "Country" and "Western". Rediscovering country music has been something the avant garde has enjoyed doing in a tongue-in-cheek, knowingly urban way for decades, but more recently something less deliberately parodic has been going on between the two seemingly incommensurable genres. The Bubbados certainly play some species of white American folk music, but it's hardly Nashville, and Misha Feigin is a free improvising Russian Balalaika player; it's not even clear which kinds of music are being played, exactly, any more.

The Bubbados call what they do "honkey tonk music", but don't expect ragtime here. This isn't the music of the honkey tonk brothels of the deep south, or even music of the city at all, but deliberately rural, "pure American" redneck music which intends to make you squeal like a piglet. "It's 'bad' awful", explains Weber in his helpful sleeve notes, "Seriously, if you've got a jones for correctness, such as metrical rhythms, proper intonation, western ideas about harmony, then this band is definitely not for you".

Well, that might be going a bit far. These boys know the chords to old songs like "Oh Bury Me Not On The Trail", and not-so-old ones like "Fading Into The Sunset", they do indeed mostly have nice 4/4 metrical rhythms and Weber's voice is pure moonshine. What they do manage to do is create something very special within those parameters.

Their songs seem to struggle with a wall of reverberating, slightly dissonant violins and feedbacked wierdness, and the recognisable world of blues and cowboy songs is delicately balanced against the band's tendency towards strange textures and noisy outbursts. Far from a what-will-they-do-next experience, however, listening to this disc has a satisfying gestalt quality which is not at all easy to achieve.

Don't believe a word of their appeals to "front porch style" music, and certainly not "the blood songs of the American working class" (thirteen of the twenty tracks are original compositions). This is a highly electrified, very contemporary band creating an image of America which is extremely sophisticated but which isn't to be taken for the real thing, which it rather self-evidently isn't, and which is all the better for it. One of the most puzzling and fascinating of recent releases, this is also very enjoyable, and can even be played at parties (the sedate sort where you can get away with Tom Waits, I mean).

This writer has remarked before that folk musics seem to be making something of a comeback in free improvisation and free jazz, particularly the latter. Well, Misha Feigin's album is free improv, but that touch of country and western is there in the title and it's there in much of the music, too. The disc is composed of seven duets -- one with each of the guests except Sharp and Williams, who get two each. That's an excellent format for us to get to know Feigin, and it gives some variety to a style -- all-strings acoustic improv -- which can be a little taxing to say the least.

The country feel isn't everywhere here, but it's certainly there on the tracks featuring Sharp and Chadbourne. Sharp's country affiliations have been well-documented, and married to his love of the blues and his virtuosic but completely unconventional approach the results are wonderfully compelling. Feigin is a little lost in the first piece here, where Sharp plays loud and fast for much of its twelve minutes, but he's there, always adding something constructive and intelligent.

The second track they do, "Zohar Cafe Blues", shows Feigin to be an imaginative chord-player with an unusual preference for sticking with an idea and developing it, although again, and as throughout this disc, the balance is very unfavourable to Feigin and this listener felt the need to adjust it (this is easy to do, as the duettists are panned hard left and right). The long jam with Chadbourne has an almost rocky intensity, packed full of riffs, strange ideas shooting off in different directions and Feigin making odd noises through, at times, a distortion pedal.

British guitar strangler Davey Williams is on top form for this session. Never the most technically complicated of players, he unleashes a very creditable version of his free jazz blues on "Balalaikofrenia", and does something downright peculiar on "BBQ-Powered Mission To Outer Space". Feigin's classical guitar on this track is

particularly good, with the furious unstopability of Derek Bailey but with his own, cleaner tone. Feigin, like Williams, generally seems to prefer notes to timbral manipulations, which is interesting considering the kind of music they both play.

This track is one of the highlights; "String Theory Revisited", which is nearly exactly the same length, is the other. LaDonna Smith was a new name to this writer, but his violin has a very vocal quality which works wonderfully with Feigin's rolling arpeggios and flurries of notes (again on classical guitar). There's just the slightest country lilt to his sound, just enough to remind you of the title of the disc and no more, but there's that singing melodicism which cuts across many different folk styles. Craig Hultgren's track, "Moondance", is another essential cut, this time developing very slowly from the cellist's reserved and sensitive long-note approach. Feigin gets plenty of room to stretch out here, and Hultgren's playing is at times ravishingly beautiful; not a description one often needs in free improv, but there it is.

In short, this is a wonderful disc. Feigin's balalaika does tend to get obscured by his more muscular peers with their larger instruments, but that's easy to remedy on your hi-fi and his classical guitar, at least, comes through loud and clear without any balance-tweaking. The company he's in here is sufficiently distinguished that it can defeat the expectation that this is a showcase for a new talent anyway. In fact, it's a disc of beautiful music, with the first track (featuring Sharp) the only let-down; Feigin seems to have little to say to him, and although both play well enough the music never really catches fire. That can't be said about what happens next, which is constantly inventive for the remaining hour. Highly recommended.

Richard Cochrane

Gino Robair: Buddy Systems

(Meniscus: 003)

Gino Robair (percussion), Dave Barrett (reeds), Myles Boisen (guitars, CD player), John Butcher (sax), Carla Kihlstedt (violin), Tim Perkis (electronics), Dan Plonsey (clarinet), LaDonna Smith (strings, voice), Matthew Sperry (bass), Oluyemi Thomas (reeds, percussion), Otomo Yoshihide (turntables, CD players)

John Butcher: Music on Seven Occasions

(Meniscus: 004)

John Butcher (sax), Gino Robair (percussion), Alexander Frangenheim (bass), Vervan Weston (piano), Thomas Lehn (synthesiser), John Corbett (guitar), Jeb Bishop (trombone), Terri Kapsalis (violin), Fred Lonberg-Holm (cello), Michael Zerang (percussion, tubaphone)

F Vattel Cherry: For Those Who Heal

(Maraschino Music: No number)

F Vattel Cherry (bass), John Dierker (bass clarinet), Peter Hickey (bass), Blaise Siwula (alto sax), John Voigt (bass), Ras Chris (guitar, harmonica, bamboo fulte, percussion)

Albums which compile duets in varied groupings are so often unlistenable; of the good tracks, one isn't enough, and the less good ones sound as if they're there just to make up numbers. One wonders why each grouping seems to have been unable to generate enough music for a proper record, or feels one is being fed scraps from the table. The result can be a pointlessly jarring, ill-conceived release of music in the wrong format (MP3, perhaps, would be better)

The quality of the music on Gino Robair's dreadfully-entitled contribution to this dubious genre is good enough to lift it beyond the reach of these reservations, however. Dan Plonsey tears it up; Kihlstedt and Sperry come over all Arvo Part-like; Tim Perkis comes from another planet, and plays with quicksilver inventiveness. Each and every one of the fourteen tracks is a little gem. They're not too little, either (another source of potential irritation): at up to nine minutes, each one is weighty enough to gather its own momentum.

Still, though, the feeling that these sorts of records are designed as documents rather than as listening experiences persists. Overall, they can sound a bit like a singles collections, or compilation tapes. Nevertheless, this one is especially good to dip into and of particular interest to those not so familiar with the musicians featured.

Robair's disk includes a superb trio featuring John Butcher and, with pleasing symmetry, Butcher's own collection of duos with varying partners includes two with Robair. This disc, however, is organised rather differently. For a start, there are four brief but still valuable segments of Butcher solo, something he has made very much his own. Secondly, the nine different partnerships are grouped together, and the selection is clearly biased in favour of Weston and Zerang (three tracks each), then Robair (two tracks); the rest appear once only.

Presumably this is an attempt to overcome the bittiness inherent in the format. Butcher's voice is far stronger and more distinctive than Robair's, and so the battle is half won anyway because of the continuity this gives the tracks. Further, his aesthetic is sufficiently strong that the music on all of these pieces sounds, as it were, of a piece, which helps enormously. As with Robair's disc, the selection of partners is impeccable; to risk repetition, however, one yearns to hear more of each grouping, and by the time a particular partnership's working methods begin to make sense, their section is over. As with Robair's disc, the material here is extremely good and very valuable stuff to have access to, but one hopes that album-length releases from some of these sessions will become available in time.

Vattel Cherry takes a rather different and ultimately more successful approach to the format on "For Those Who Heal". Instead of wide-ranging instrumentations, he's gone for reeds-plus-bass, bass-plus-bass and bass solo. There are only eight tracks, one of which (the one with Hickey) is twenty minutes long, so there's plenty of time and space to make the music matter. All five partners are strong players in the contemporary free jazz style; Dierker a sort of melodic, laid-back Charles Gayle, Siwula weaving a flowing ballad which is pure New York, Voigt (probably the best-known name here) dishing up electrified attitude, Hickey a more angular partner who challenges Cherry with happy results.

Cherry himself is a funky player, enjoying the snap and pop of the strings against the fingerboard as much as the more conventional lines and walks of this music. His playing always seems to have a strutting, almost swaggering gait about it, cocky but warm too, perfect for a gospelly, sometimes raucous but above all blues-

based jazz style. The duet with Hickey is something of a step outside this territory, but it's to his credit that they stick at it and create some dramatic, even startling music as a result.

The music on all three of these records is truly excellent. This writer would dearly love to hear albums by *any* of the featured duets. Your tolerance for hearing bits and pieces stitched together into an album, however, will probably be a matter of personal taste and patience. Of the lot, Cherry's has by far the most continuity. Perhaps we ought to be more tolerant of discontinuity, but most listening situations will not favour the bits-and-pieces approach. All three recommended with that reservation.

Richard Cochrane

John Butcher & Dylan Van der Schyff: Points, Snags and Windings

([Meniscus](#): 010)

John Butcher (saxophones), Dylan van der Schyff (percussion)

Butcher/Charles/Dorner: The Contest of Pleasures

([Potlatch](#): P201)

John Butcher (saxophones), Xavier Charles (clarinet), Axel Dorner (trumpet)

John Butcher is one of the most impressive exponents of the saxophone to emerge since the end of the '60s, a player whose methodical study of polyphonics has led him to a vocabulary which is unique among his peers. While others use so-called "extended" techniques as punctuations or expressive gestures embedded in a language which remains founded on conventional jazz articulations, Butcher's music dispenses with this foundation entirely

His music isn't very jazzy in any event, and the far stronger influence of post-war composition is much more evident. He always sounds cool and rational even if seeing him live scotches that myth about this kind of playing; indeed, Butcher is rarely anything but completely involved in the music he's playing, and the results are tough but elegant.

The duo with van der Schyff is really very much like a solo session. That's not to say that the percussionist doesn't contribute much; indeed, the part he plays is critical in setting this apart from the numerous (though all indispensable) solo recordings Butcher has released. Van der Schyff's approach is to use only a limited palette of sounds at any one time, and in each case it's a sound-world close to Butcher's heart.

"Pool Lights" offers a good example. It opens with bowed cymbals which, as one might expect, form such a bond with Butcher's delicate multiphonics that the two are often inseparable. Later, van der Schyff switches to quiet clicks, and the saxophonist does likewise; then long, rubbing sounds return them to mutiphonics again, only much transformed. Throughout, the restricted sound-palette and proximity of the two voices make for a fascinating re-definition of the reeds-and-drums duo format. Something more different from Coltrane and Ali is hard to imagine.

The trio disk is also characterised by close sonorities, which is surprising given the different musical styles in evidence. Dorner, like Butcher, has made those "extended techniques" his mainstay, but they sound very little like Butcher's. Where the latter's sounds are heavily reed-based, Dorner uses tongue and lips to generate his, creating an entirely different sound-world. Their shared aesthetic concerns, however, ensure that whenever they work together they do so closely, and this session is no exception. One can always tell them apart, but they travel the same roads in different vehicles, and the journey never gets dull.

Although Charles is far from a straight player, his approach is slightly different from that largely shared by these two. He likes notes, albeit squeaky, off-pitch ones, and that means he often adds a linear element to the dense sound of Butcher and Dorner. His is a voice we will be hearing more from in the future, a player of considerable style who knows what to play what (Potlatch previously released "[La Piece](#)", his impressive album with duo Kristoff K Roll)..

The noises these three make, then, are really quite different, but the overall trio sound is surprisingly cohesive. They work slowly and deliberately, building up textural ideas and playing around the margins of them as they do so. This is very dramatic stuff, and the final track is a tour de force which creates big, almost orchestral sounds from the small group.

It would be easy to dismiss Butcher's playing as merely technically impressive, were the evidence for his musicality not so abundant. He has little interest in grandstanding, and these days he has precious little to prove on a technical level. From his very earliest recordings, he has demonstrated a logical but also surprisingly passionate musical conception which has always outweighed in importance his researches into the uncharted waters of saxophone sound. Butcher is a hugely important player but, much more importantly, a musician who is a joy to listen to. The trio disk in particular comes highly recommended, but enthusiasts will much enjoy both.

Richard Cochrane

Butcher/Durrant/Russell: The Scenic Route

([Emanem](#) : 4029)

John Butcher (saxophones), Phil Durrant (violin), John Russell (guitar)

Butcher, Durrant and Russell form one of the key free improvising trios on the London scene. Uncompromisingly committed to making the music count in the moment it's being made, it's good to hear them recorded so well in a live setting. While a studio recording might capture the details of this extremely delicate music, players like these rise to the occasion of a gig by pulling out the stops and investing in every gesture. The adrenaline and highly focussed concentration are almost palpable in these five, mostly long, improvisations.

Butcher is quite simply one of the most advanced saxophonists on the planet, both technically and aesthetically. You can hear many, many young players trying to use the sounds which are his stock-in-trade, with ungainly and sometimes even embarrassing results. It is by no means easy to create the controlled, thoughtful music Butcher creates using overtones, false fingerings, reed sounds, breath sounds, key noises and the rest. There is a jazz connection here, of course, but stronger with Butcher is the New Music influence, in the work of Bartolozzi and the like, who sought to extend woodwind sounds to enrich the composer's palette. Butcher's improvisation really is spontaneous composition, too, because he gives careful weight to every idea, making a compelling argument out of his music rather than moving from episode to episode as so many improvisors are wont to do.

Durrant compliments Butcher well, and it's no surprise that these two are often found playing together in a variety of groupings. Unlike many players, Durrant seems to have completely abandoned the idea that group improvisation is some kind of competition. Instead of trying to be the profoundest, most dazzling or, if all else fails, loudest member of the group, Durrant works with Butcher to create true group interplay. That's why he's often overlooked as a player -- it is quite possible to see him play nothing but a few quiet, bowed notes in a whole piece. Understated where he needs to be -- but not shy of his instrument either -- Durrant is a great partner for Butcher and, what's more, they seem to understand one another perfectly.

Russell, by contrast, plays guitar as if he's never seen one before in his life, as if he were exploring its potential for making sounds all the time. Eschewing conventional technique almost entirely (much more than either of his partners does), he scratches, rattles and clicks through his music. This is hard to follow at first, but his contribution soon shows itself to be most valuable. Working much like a percussionist, he nevertheless avoids trying to punch home accents (there aren't any, really) and goes for pure texture. The result -- and especially his work with Durrant -- is surprising and successful.

This is an excellent session of undiluted British free improv by some of the best in the business (if you can call it a business, that is). Listeners who are unfamiliar with the work of any of these players, or with the genre as a whole, are encouraged to start here. Initiates will already know that this will have to go on their shopping lists without delay.

Richard Cochrane

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Richard Cochrane

Butcher/Durrant/Russell: The Scenic Route

([Emanem](#) : 4029)

John Butcher (saxophones), Phil Durrant (violin), John Russell (guitar)

Butcher, Durrant and Russell form one of the key free improvising trios on the London scene. Uncompromisingly committed to making the music count in the moment it's being made, it's good to hear them recorded so well in a live setting. While a studio recording might capture the details of this extremely delicate music, players like these rise to the occasion of a gig by pulling out the stops and investing in every gesture. The adrenaline and highly focussed concentration are almost palpable in these five, mostly long, improvisations.

Butcher is quite simply one of the most advanced saxophonists on the planet, both technically and aesthetically. You can hear many, many young players trying to use the sounds which are his stock-in-trade, with ungainly and sometimes even embarrassing results. It is by no means easy to create the controlled, thoughtful music Butcher creates using overtones, false fingerings, reed sounds, breath sounds, key noises and the rest. There is a jazz connection here, of course, but stronger with Butcher is the New Music influence, in the work of Bartolozzi and the like, who sought to extend woodwind sounds to enrich the composer's palette. Butcher's improvisation really is spontaneous composition, too, because he gives careful weight to every idea, making a compelling argument out of his music rather than moving from episode to episode as so many improvisors are wont to do.

Durrant compliments Butcher well, and it's no surprise that these two are often found playing together in a variety of groupings. Unlike many players, Durrant seems to have completely abandoned the idea that group improvisation is some kind of competition. Instead of trying to be the profoundest, most dazzling or, if all else fails, loudest member of the group, Durrant works with Butcher to create true group interplay. That's why he's often overlooked as a player -- it is quite possible to see him play nothing but a few quiet, bowed notes in a whole piece. Understated where he needs to be -- but not shy of his instrument either -- Durrant is a great partner for Butcher and, what's more, they seem to understand one another perfectly.

Russell, by contrast, plays guitar as if he's never seen one before in his life, as if he were exploring its potential for making sounds all the time. Eschewing conventional technique almost entirely (much more than either of his partners does), he scratches, rattles and clicks through his music. This is hard to follow at first, but his contribution soon shows itself to be most valuable. Working much like a percussionist, he nevertheless avoids trying to punch home accents (there aren't any, really) and goes for pure texture. The result -- and especially his work with Durrant -- is surprising and successful.

This is an excellent session of undiluted British free improv by some of the best in the business (if you can call it a business, that is). Listeners who are unfamiliar with the work of any of these players, or with the genre as a whole, are encouraged to start here. Initiates will already know that this will have to go on their shopping lists without delay.

Richard Cochrane

Elliott Sharp/Carbon: Interference

(Atavistic: ALP50 CD)

Elliott Sharp (guitars, samples, saxophones, computer), Zeena Parkins (electric harp), Marc Sloan (bass), Joseph Trump (drums), David Weinstein (sampler)

Elliott Sharp, "composer in combat boots" and darling of the New York avant garde, is among the two or three most innovative guitarists on the planet. Employing very little standard technique, he has forged a musical language completely distinct from Derek Bailey's intimate (and now ubiquitous) scratches and squeaks. If Bailey was influenced by Webern's extreme delicacy, Sharp is a disciple of Xenakis, mobilising huge blocks of sound in the pursuit of something abstract and impersonal. Fellow travellers will find themselves listening to this or any other of his releases, ear pressed to the speaker, wondering what he's doing.

Although an improviser, he is also a modernist, and embraces effects pedals (distortion and delay being his favoured condiments), samplers and sequencing. Often, as on this album, his guitar becomes a sound-source to be manipulated and turned into something far removed from the rock idiom. Likewise, he is just as happy to prop his guitar against a wall and play squalling sax (he's not a "proper" sax player, more a have-a-goer like James Chance) or program his loping, rolling computer rhythms. These latter seem to be connected via ISDN straight into Trump's brain, so close is the interaction between them.

Because of his tendency to bury the traditional tone of the guitar under a welter of electronic treatments, and because his extended techniques do not make for a traditional tone anyway, it is rather hard to pick out Sharp's contributions from Zeena Parkins' distorted harp. Parkins is another improviser who is just as happy in a wholly-composed environment, and she makes a fine contribution here, mostly blending with Sharp but occasionally stepping forward with ideas of her own. She has recorded with him before, and played with him often: the untitled eighth track finds them duetting in a tempest of suffering amplifiers, and is a revelation. Pulling down the full quintet's brick wall reveals the true extent of their symbiosis, as close as Jim Hall's with Bill Evans.

Sharp's musical tendencies can veer wildly between genres, taking in industrial, jazz, prog rock, techno, modernism and so on in half an album, and Carbon were formed in part to give a focus to his rock/classical fusion. Nevertheless, it's unusual to hear something as satisfyingly disciplined as Interference. All seven tracks are strong ensemble performances, with few solos as such, and much of the music is textural and riff-based. Musos hankering for Sharp's geometrical-freakout solo style might be disappointed, although whether many bedroom strummers seek out his albums the way they seek out stuff by John McLaughlin is another question.

A minimalist he may be on paper, but he can never resist packing too much variation into every bar for boredom to get a look in -- his driving, ametrical funk is always veering off in odd directions or encountering peculiar objects in its path. The exception here is "Jungle Freeze", a skittering collage of machine noises and harp abuse supporting an anti-solo on sax (alien wailing sounds; no tunes) and only briefly breaking into more familiar, percussive territory. Sharp's sax playing, especially here, has something of the charm of Ornette's trumpet about it.

This is not an album which is going to surprise any existing Carbon converts. Still, it would be an injustice to claim that this was just more of the same from the outfit even if new ground is not being broken with such obvious abandon as at its inception. In Parkins, Sharp has found a genuine kindred spirit. Great pairings like this are rare and precious in this kind of music, which is so often played in ad hoc combinations in which little of depth is really shared. This is the most concentrated of Carbon's albums, their most successfully-integrated lineup playing some powerful music, and comes unconditionally recommended.

Richard Cochrane

Kent Carter and Albrecht Maurer: The Juillaguet Collection

([Emanem](#): 4033)

Kent Carter (bass), Albrecht Maurer (violin)

There can be something really refreshing about all-strings improvisation, especially when it's as good, and as accessible, as this. No harsh noise-techniques for Carter and Maurer here; these are pieces about notes, pieces which recall early twentieth-century composers like Hindemith, Bartok and Kodaly, pieces full of sweeping harmonies, exquisite dissonances which seem somehow hollow and folkish. This writer has commented before on a phenomenon in free improvisation -- especially in the US -- of looking back to a time before Webern and Boulez, a retrieval of the late Romantic music which those composers themselves grew out of. Well, this is another example, from three years ago, and played by musicians who have quite possibly been doing this sort of thing for much longer. So much for trend-spotting.

Carter is one of the better-known free jazz bassmen of his generation, and the list of his previous employers is impressive reading. Here he certainly shows some of his jazz chops, wielding a massive pizzicato like a laser-guided hammer-blow when it's needed, but this really isn't jazz, or at any rate there's no walking or swinging here. He plays arco for most of the session, and between him and Maurer the sound is more like that of a string ensemble than a conventional jazz duet.

Maurer has less name-recognition, which perhaps explains why the conventional listing-order for musicians has been inverted in this case (the violin should be the "lead" instrument, the bass just a "supporting" one -- none of that nonsense here, of course). Still, his playing is excellent and full of imagination. He's never gratuitously spikey or deliberately difficult, and often his playing has a distinctly nostalgic feel. That's no bad thing; there's a world of difference between piquantly nostalgic yearning and they-don't-write-'em-like-that-any-more retro-fetishism.

These performances are almost entirely improvised, to the extent that Emanem have suggested that this CD be filed under "New Music/Mostly Free Improvisation". While the idea of record shops which have a "Mostly Free Improvisation" department may be a beautiful dream never to be realised, the description is accurate enough; as well as six free improvisations, there are two Maurer tunes and one by Carter. These "compositions" are clearly of the notes-on-paper sort, but the composed sections have an improvisatory feel, and merge quickly but seamlessly into improvisation. It's always impressive when musicians manage to make this most difficult of transitions feel as natural as Maurer and Carter do here, and this is only compounded by the fact that their all-improvised performances sound just as good as those which are launched by compositions.

Richard Cochrane

CCM4

Construction, Destruction, Recreation ([Newsonic](#): newsonic10)

Destroys New York ([Newsonic](#): newsonic14)

[Pete Cafarella](#) (accordion, piano, computer), [Rafael Cohen](#) (oboe, English horn, computer), [Seth Misterka](#) (reeds, computer)

CCM4 are a trio of core members of the [Middletown Creative Orchestra](#). Although some features of that group's music can be heard in their work, CCM4, unsurprisingly, sound very different from the large group from which they sprang.

"Construction, Destruction, Recreation" is a remarkably gentle record. The opener, "Composition One", is a lovely, slow-moving dialogue of oboe and accordion accompanied by sine tones and, at other times, a quiet rumbling of digitised distortion. It's atmospheric and rather anonymous, lilting but never lyrical, a chilly but not unpleasant ambience which never becomes boring. Towards the end, Misterka's ascetic alto joins Cohen and Cafarella for a semi-composed section combining polytonality with a bouncing ametrical but simple rhythm in eighth- and sixteenth-notes. It dissolves in turn into a frenzied free-for-all, which feels almost insensitive after the thoughtful twenty minutes which precede it.

The second track, simply entitled "CCM4", makes heavy use of composition and, like the MCO itself, they seem to favour blocks of dissonant sound. Without the energy and hectic detail of the Orchestra, however, this approach risks being merely loud and unpalatable. The third and longest track, "Wesleyan University", is more successful for being more varied. While the essentially lumpy style remains, it's tempered by changing instrumental combinations and strategies. Misterka's alto, which crops up here in some nice, however brief, solo moments, is far more appealing than the bellowing baritone his sports in "CCM4", and Cohen's Cafarella's piano and accordion keep the pace moving.

Five months after "Wesleyan University" was committed to tape, CCM4 were invited to perform at Braxton's Tri-Centric Festival in New York. The title of their piece probably indicates a certain frustration at that city's continuing dominance of the avant garde, its notorious cliquiness and its status as the testing-ground for new, ambitious players. These Connecticut noisemongers are having none of it, as is immediately apparent from the incendiary opening; these repetitive, harsh chords are everything "CCM4" (the piece) tries but fails to be. It's a promising start.

Although the sleeve notes apologise for the "aural havoc" of the performance, it's actually a lot less murky and disorganised than one might expect. It helps that the recording is excellent, so that even at their most agonisingly loud, every computer and live acoustic sound can be heard. It's invigorating and exciting stuff, at the edge of pure noise but certainly not overstepping it; conventional ideas about rhythmic and melodic units flit about beneath what can sound, if you drop into the piece at random, like a metal-shearing works.

Although Seth Misterka's playing isn't going to be to everybody's taste, it's a very accomplished version of that vocalised, gestural style mastered by Peter Brotzmann. Cafarella, as on the previous recording, is a star, and Cohen's oboe also adds to the reediness of their ensemble work and provides swirling, fiddly solo lines when required. It's their interaction with their computers, however, which really gives this disc its bite. It's not all full-on wailing, but when they turn up the volume they really do suck the paint off the walls, which is exactly as it ought to be. Elsewhere, there are quiet interludes, and even moments when one or two of them are playing slow, contemplative stuff while the other goes crazy in the background. This flexibility and openness to possibilities is the trio's greatest asset.

CCM4 are carving out a very distinctive territory. They are not, really, an improvising band, at least in terms of listening; although they do improvise, there's precious little by way of solos here. Instead, they seem determined to find a kind of "spontaneous composition" which actually makes sense. On "Construction, Destruction, Recreation", the result is a rarefied and sometimes overly chilly music. The disc is certainly worthy of a listen, but it's not always successful. "Destroys New York", on the other hand, is a more turbulent performance which will be enjoyed by all those with strong constitutions.

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[Richard Cochrane](#)

Eugene Chadbourne: Worms with Strings

([Leo](#): CDLR264)

Eugene Chadbourne (stringed instruments), George Cremaschi (bass), Brent Dunn (bass), Bob Jordan (tapes, objects etc), Carla Kihlstedt (violin), Barry Mitterhof (mandolin), Ted Reichman (accordion, piano), Brian Ritchie (bass guitar etc), Charles Rosina (tapes and effects), Leslie Ross (bassoon), Rik Rue (tapes), Carrie Shull (oboe), Tony Trischka (banjo)

Eugene Chadbourne specialises in conceptual Americana which steers completely clear of the distinction between highbrow and lowbrow as if they were two cities in a grain belt state. Hardly bothering to ask himself whether he is parodying the country and western which is so widely ridiculed by the po-mo literati or indulging in a nostalgic rediscovery of his rural roots, he creates a highly idiosyncratic fusion of faux-folk. A world-of-his-own music, one might say.

To start where we probably ought to, Chadbourne is a virtuoso. For all his buffoon posture, this is a guy who can really play. His mastery of a whole range of techniques -- fast banjo picking, slide, bluesy soloing, jazz, classical and flamenco techniques as well as more experimental stuff -- is enough to turn most pickers green. He never sounds like a collage-player, though despite the often disconcerting changes of direction which are to be expected of anyone so closely associated with Zorn.

The reason for this is that all of his sources are connected. American folk music has always been an amalgam of a variety of European styles, along with the unique input which came about with the emancipation of the slaves. Chadbourne seems to instinctively put the whole of American history under his fingers, although he has precious few concerns about what order it goes in and which social/geographical/racial boundaries he's supposed not to step all over.

Some of these pieces are multi-tracked solo performances, and these are lovely even at their most unhinged. His sense of harmony enables him to construct the most enormous dissonances without ever sounding merely muddy or bludgeoning; a terribly difficult thing to do with plucked strings. His imagination is feverish, non-stop, as if someone were running towards him to snatch up that darned banjo and break it over his knee. It's impossible to do anything while this disk is playing -- you end up just standing there, mouth agape, burning a hole in your shirt with the iron.

There are also some very nice, and very unusual, ensemble pieces. The use of bassoon and oboe gives them more of a chamber sound, and the mad cyberhillbilly subsides to make way for something slightly more dignified. Not that this stuff keeps still for very long, nor that it's any less intense, but the group almost inevitably has more space and a less frenetic feel than Chadbourne alone. This is probably little short of an essential album. Everything is perfect -- the playing, the ideas, even the down-home quality of the (mostly four-track) recordings. A work of enormous, generous imagination.

Richard Cochrane

Eugene Chadbourne: *Beauty and the Bloodsucker*

([Leo Lab](#): CDLR270)

Eugene Chadbourne (guitars, truntables, studio editing etc), Ashley Adams (bass), Ellery Eskelin (tenor sax), Lyn Johnston (contrabass clarinet, one track only), Jeff Kaiser (trumpet, euphonium), Carla Kihlstedt (violin, one track only), Rob Mallard (tenor sax, flute), Jacques Palinckx (electric guitar), Dan Plonsey (reeds), Garth Powell (percussion), Brian Ritchie (bass guitar), Gino Robair (percussion, one track only), Varrie Shull (oboe), Lukas Simonis (electric guitar), Jeff Sipes (percussion), Leonid Soybelman (classical guitar)

Eugene Chadbourne is not just one of the finest guitarists on the planet, and one who is rather neglected in Europe; he's also a fiendishly inventive re-organiser of musical materials. Just on the strength of this year's *Leo* releases -- *Insect and Western* and then the phenomenal [Worms with Strings](#) -- he ought to have got a lot more people to sit up and take notice of him, although he's been doing what he does for many years now, often in relative obscurity and in voluntary exile from the mainstream music industry.

This disc has a similar MO, and a similar feel, to the previous release; taking recordings of semi-improvised pieces and tinkering about with them in the studio to create a suite of pieces which feel like experiments in what it's possible to do with the notion of free-improvised country bebop. Like a case of butterflies, this album is a sequence of variations on a theme, designed to show the diversity which can arise from a single, simple model.

In a sense, the genotype is exemplified most clearly by the opening track, "Nymphaliadae", a trio of Chadbourne backed by Brian Ritchie's sure-footed rhythm guitar and Ellery Eskelin on scalding, boppish tenor. It's hot but not screaming, free but bookended by a swinging melody line, and features Chadbourne's unclassifiable slide guitar which moves with utter ease between the territories of country blues and jazz. It probably makes some sense to think of him as one of the very few genuine heirs to Robert Johnson, except that Chadbourne's swirling rural blues lines are embedded in a postmodern patina of irony and self-referentiality.

What's hard to get about Chadbourne's work at first is that, yes, he's having fun with this material, and yes, he's a rootless cosmopolitan and sophisticated observer of a kaleidoscope of musical cultures, but no, he isn't being arch and sneery. Nothing could be further from the truth; his affection for country and western isn't even patronising; it's just a chef's affection for a versatile ingredient. The sources for this music are just that, and they go into the mix as raw material to be borrowed, transformed and integrated into a genre which has yet to be named but could safely be referred to as "eclectic".

There's plenty here for fans of Chadbourne's playing, and some names which will be familiar from previous projects have cropped up here again. And again, these sidemen and -women, most of whom are little-known, don't disappoint. This, however, is Dr Chadbourne's session, a point which is evidenced by the fact that no-one, bar the leader, appears on more than half a dozen of the fifteen tracks presented here. It's fairer to say, then, that the other instrumentalists give each one of these pieces every ounce of their concentration and enthusiasm.

Richard Cochrane

Feigin/Hiltgren/Smith: They Are We Are

([Leo Lab](#): CD071)

Misha Feigin (guitar), Craig Hultgren (cello), LaDonna Smith (violin)

Tammen/Duval: The Road Bends Here

([Leo Lab](#): CD072)

Hans Tammen (guitar), DOminic Duval (bass)

Eugene Chadbourne: Piramida Cu Povesti

([Leo](#): CDLR304)

Eugene Chadbourne (guitar)

Three albums here of all-strings improvised music, all three of very different flavours and featuring very different guitarists (and all three, as it happens, on the prolific Leo label).

Feigin's playing is strongly rooted in conventional techniques, and has rather a strong link with American folk music; he may play classical guitar and balalaika here, but they're often made to sound like a big, steel-stringed acoustic. He enjoys setting up rhythmic, harmonically vague riffs -- perhaps a memory of early influences like Led Zep, as described in his wonderful sleeve notes -- while the violin and cello work in more spikey, "New Music" territory.

Actually, Smith has a degree of folk in his paying, too, and if the overwhelming effect is of shibboleths like Penderecki, the subtle undercurrents are more melodic; not so much reminiscent of the jangling dance tunes which shimmer underneath Feigin's guitar, but the long, slow ballads of the mountains and the Wild West. Whether Smith was actually influenced by this sort of thing is by the by: the music here certainly seems to partake of it, albeit under the surface, as it often did on Feigin's previous Leo release, one track of which also featured Smith's fiddle.

As is so often the case, however, it's hard to tell the two string players apart here except by extremes of pitch, and since both use non-standard sounds very often the problem is compounded, if problem it is; in fact, it's more of a problem for a reviewer than a listener, who is enveloped in their sound very nicely. A final point: Feigin sings a kind of improv scat, too, and it isn't horrible, which is most unusual.

None of those folk impressions for Hans Tammen, one of the most ferociously talented and inventive guitarists to emerge in the last ten years. His technique is noisy and percussive, is energy relentless and unstoppable. Since his recent releases have focussed on electric guitar, where his ability to wring hitherto unimagined sounds from the instrument is truly dazzling, it's nice to hear him here exclusively on acoustic.

His duo partner Duval's most high-profile gig to date has, arguably, been with Cecil Taylor, and there is certainly a strong connection between the pianist and Tammen. Both play with a headlong energy which seems impossible to sustain, which seems bound to be exhausted after only a moment, but which somehow spirals on until you forget it's a whirling, high-speed rush and find yourself at the eye of the storm. There is no doubt that Tammen's music is powerfully energetic, but it seems also to breathe in very long phrases, much as Taylors does.

To keep up with this sort of thing requires considerable skill. There's little point trying to match it note-for-note; only cacophony is likely to ensue. Fortunately, Duval has a wealth of tricks up his sleeve, and he has the strength to lead as well as follow, making for a duo performance of exhilarating dynamism, and a set of eleven tracks each of which has a clear and distinctive identity. Don't miss this one, especially if Tammen's work is new to you.

The work of Eugene Chadbourne, on the other hand, will be known to many, and it's likely that the ongoing series of releases on Leo will in the future be considered an important period of his output. They are all quite different, but all have similar concerns lurking behind them.

There's no question that Chadbourne is an estimable technician, with a vocabulary spanning rock, jazz and a dazzling variety of folk musics. Here we're treated to unretouched, unadulterated improvisations on the resonator guitar, an instrument forever associated with the country blues.

As you might expect, it's a relaxed affair, with nobody in a hurry and nobody getting into a lather about production values; in common with most of his other recent projects, it sounds like a bedroom 4-track recording and it quite possibly is. In such intimate (or faux-intimate) surroundings, Chadbourne gives us his avant side, mixing scratches and hollow knocks with great sliding slurries of notes related to, but in no way resembling, the blues and folk which sit under the surface of everything he does, even the most way-out things like this one.

Chadbourne/Bennink/Kondo: Jazz Bunker

([Leo](#): GY7/8)

Eugene Chadbourne (guitar etc), Han Bennink (percussion, reeds etc), Toshinori Kondo (trumpet etc)

Eugene Chadbourne: I Talked to Death in Colour

([Leo](#): CDLR283/284)

Eugene Chadbourne (guitar, compositions) with various groups

Chadbourne material has been pouring into the Leo catalogue of late. "I Talked..." is the most recent instalment of a sequence of new work begun with "Insect and Western" about a year ago; "Jazz Bunker", on Leo offshoot "Golden Years of New Jazz", presents a really rather different Chadbourne from more than two decades ago, the days when he was re-writing the rule book with John Zorn in a hopelessly embattled avant garde.

This trio was always bound to be anarchic. Chadbourne at that time was capable of astonishing leaps into the anti-musical in the hope, perhaps, of going so far as to come out the other side. Hence "In Memory of Nikki Arane" (Incus CD23), his virtually unlistenable set of duets with Zorn from around this time. This latest discovery (if such it is) isn't nearly so nasty, although it gets pretty close. Documenting something between a jazz gig and a theatrical performance, it spans two CDs with non-stop performances on each.

What's exciting in this performance is the lack of respect for aesthetic hierarchies. It finds Kondo furiously blowing alongside Bennink on trombone, one man working out years of highly-wrought vocabulary, the other simply making random noises. Chadbourne is a wild man, shouting at the other band members ("Hey, didn't you used to play with those famous jazz guys?") and, one suspects, the audience, from whom waves of laughter can occasionally be heard.

This is rather in keeping with the [Geerken/Tchicai/Moye](#) session on the same label, in its anarchic spirit and lack of proper musical values despite the presence of three people who very clearly do have them. This gig was, quite obviously, chaos. But it sounds like a very joyous and friendly chaos, something like a really good but really drunken night out. This sort of stuff isn't going to please improv purists or free jazz purists or, really, any kind of purists, but it's enormous fun for those who like their fun rambunctious, fat and lary. Like being slapped about by the Tango man, again and again.

"I Talked..." brings us up to date, finding Chadbourne just as radical but maybe a little more sophisticated, showing off some groups he's been involved with in recent years. All of them play, pretty much, his now-trademarked brand of heavily-skewed American folk; it's as if he has made a career out of Hendrix's "Star Spangled Banner", which is not to say he's based his work on a thin concept but, on the contrary, that he obviously has found inexhaustible potential in the simple idea it encapsulated.

The long title track has Norman Minogue on frighteningly proactive theremin, something some people treat like an easily-broken ornament. For his contribution alone, this is fifteen minutes well spent, but the rest of the band really kick out the jams as well, although what sort of music they're playing is harder to figure out. When the band returns later on the CD, they're playing Ayler's "Prophecy" in an arrangement that sounds more than a little like Henry Threadgill's Very Very Circus -- something of a departure, then, from the folk idiom.

In fact, it may be a mistake to expect Chadbourne to play his crazy C&W card all the time, like expecting the class joker to be funny all the time. There's always been plenty of jazz, plenty of chamber music and plenty of avant-wildness about him, too, and these all come out in different ways in the course of this record. All of it is abrasive but, although recording quality is still slightly iffy, this sounds much more polished than previous recent releases. Chadbourne has a charming but rather thin voice and should, really, avoid singing, which he doesn't do, but his guitar playing is magnificent and taste in co-conspirators as impeccable as ever.

We're lucky to have musicians like Chadbourne, who constantly seek new ways of making music. Not that this is "research" in the modernist sense, but rather the construction of an alternate reality, a dream-world of his own imagining. Access to such worlds is a rarity; Ayler's records provide another example, which is why it's nice to hear him do "Prophecy" here, and also "Change has Come", performed in wonderfully Aylerian mode but made entirely his own. Those who have enjoyed his other Leo releases of the last year or so won't be disappointed; newcomers would do well to start here.

Richard Cochrane

Chadbourne/Bennink/Kondo: Jazz Bunker

([Leo](#): GY7/8)

Eugene Chadbourne (guitar etc), Han Bennink (percussion, reeds etc), Toshinori Kondo (trumpet etc)

Eugene Chadbourne: I Talked to Death in Colour

([Leo](#): CDLR283/284)

Eugene Chadbourne (guitar, compositions) with various groups

Chadbourne material has been pouring into the Leo catalogue of late. "I Talked..." is the most recent instalment of a sequence of new work begun with "Insect and Western" about a year ago; "Jazz Bunker", on Leo offshoot "Golden Years of New Jazz", presents a really rather different Chadbourne from more than two decades ago, the days when he was re-writing the rule book with John Zorn in a hopelessly embattled avant garde.

This trio was always bound to be anarchic. Chadbourne at that time was capable of astonishing leaps into the anti-musical in the hope, perhaps, of going so far as to come out the other side. Hence "In Memory of Nikki Arane" (Incus CD23), his virtually unlistenable set of duets with Zorn from around this time. This latest discovery (if such it is) isn't nearly so nasty, although it gets pretty close. Documenting something between a jazz gig and a theatrical performance, it spans two CDs with non-stop performances on each.

What's exciting in this performance is the lack of respect for aesthetic hierarchies. It finds Kondo furiously blowing alongside Bennink on trombone, one man working out years of highly-wrought vocabulary, the other simply making random noises. Chadbourne is a wild man, shouting at the other band members ("Hey, didn't you used to play with those famous jazz guys?") and, one suspects, the audience, from whom waves of laughter can occasionally be heard.

This is rather in keeping with the [Geerken/Tchicai/Moye](#) session on the same label, in its anarchic spirit and lack of proper musical values despite the presence of three people who very clearly do have them. This gig was, quite obviously, chaos. But it sounds like a very joyous and friendly chaos, something like a really good but really drunken night out. This sort of stuff isn't going to please improv purists or free jazz purists or, really, any kind of purists, but it's enormous fun for those who like their fun rambunctious, fat and lary. Like being slapped about by the Tango man, again and again.

"I Talked..." brings us up to date, finding Chadbourne just as radical but maybe a little more sophisticated, showing off some groups he's been involved with in recent years. All of them play, pretty much, his now-trademarked brand of heavily-skewed American folk; it's as if he has made a career out of Hendrix's "Star Spangled Banner", which is not to say he's based his work on a thin concept but, on the contrary, that he obviously has found inexhaustible potential in the simple idea it encapsulated.

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Richard Cochrane

Chamaeleo Vulgaris: Overture Facile

([Leo](#): CD061)

Frederick Galiay (electric bass, live electronics, voice), Jean-Sebastien Mariage (guitar, electronics), Bertrand Denzler (tenor sax, microphone, effects), Gilbert Roggi (drums, percussion), Frank Vaillant (drums), Bertrand Perrin (sampler, piano), Simon Pillar (cello, one track only)

Denzler has already had a release on Leo this year, continuing the label's dedication to quality rather than quantity of names which often results in multiple releases. No harm there; The [Bertrand Denzler Cluster release](#) was very different from this one but certainly whetted some appetites. On this occasion, though, his voice is far from the dominant one.

The main protagonists here are Galiay and Mariage; both appear on every track, excepting only a few solo tracks by one or other of them. The other personnel appear liberally but intermittently: Denzler and Roggi each appear on six tracks, Vaillant four and Perrin just two. This is important to note because the effect of this disc is very ensemble-like, and separating them out is the first step in picking out different styles from among these very versatile players working in an anything-goes environment.

Galiay shows he can hold his end up on solo bass in a number of places, particularly "miniature II", consisting as it does of carefully-judged groups of notes punctuated by silences. A second Galiay solo piece follows, but this is very different: a roaring caterwaul of noise generated mainly by shouting through what sounds like cheap distortion pedals. The piece takes its queue directly from death metal, and a connection with the heaviest of all rock persists throughout the disc

Mariage has a relationship with his guitar which is a bit like the increaingly impressive Hans Tammen's: sure, he can play it "properly" if he wants to, but his distinctive moments come more from a noise-based aesthetic. His own solo track, "Stella Herme", is a beautifully atmospheric series of scrapes, creaks and high-frequency swoops. It's not always successful -- his not-too-interesting slide playing on "La Gorge" is a touch long and a touch loud -- but it never really grates and often hits the mark.

Galiay and Mariage, as a duo, dominate this recording in the sense that it's their show, and their own flavours are the ones which taste the strongest. That rock influence is the most notable one, and in duet these two betray not a trace of jazz in their playing -- unlike Denzler, for whom free jazz is stock-in-trade. The heavy use of electronic effects, and focus on atmosphere above melody or instrumental virtuosity, are crucial elements of their strategy.

There is a link to modernist classicism, too (as there so often is in free improvised music), although it seems less strong. Even on tracks like "miniature III", which has a distinct Webernian texture about it, there's also the searching, quasi-naïve quality of rock music offsetting any sense of rarefied intellectualism. It's not exactly the rhythm so much as the texture and instrumental approach which recalls rock; the process, of course, is free improvisation and there are no songs or riffs in here.

Denzler appears on this track rather atavistically playing a mouthpiece (or something similar), but unleashes the full force of his Shepp/Sanders influenced voice elsewhere; even here, though, his jazz sensibilities seem filtered by the context. This more textural and less linear voice is an interesting one; this certainly doesn't feel like his most comfortable blowing situation, but it's one he is able to contribute excellent stuff to.

The other players appear less frequently. Roggi and Vaillant sound as if they, too, have come to free improv through rock, and like many other free percussionists they have no apparent interest in swing. Perrin seems to have a lot of tricks on his hard disc and makes great capital out of his two tracks, while Simon Pillar's cello appears for one minute, and does so very nicely. These figures all add colour and interest to an album which is essentially Galiay and Mariage's, with Denzler a close third.

The overall effect? As often happens with improv albums in which more than one person uses electronics, the results are extremely varied and can be very abrasive. That said, they are uniformly good. This is a disc which will be enjoyed by anyone who was glad they bought this year's much-feted [Statements Quintet release](#), also from Leo and also featuring this kind of restless but not pointlessly unstable music-making, fusing the flexibility of acoustic instruments with the expanded palette electronics offers. This kind of music smells like the future.

Richard Cochrane

Rhys Chatham: Hard Edge

([The Wire Editions](#): 9002-2)

Rhys Chatham (trumpet), Lou Ciccotelli (percussion), Gary Jeff (bass guitar, electronics), Gary Smith (guitar), Pat Thomas (guitar, electronics)

Marsh/Franklin/Crowther: Shell of Certainty

([Visionlogic](#): VLG101)

Steve Franklin (keyboards), Tim Crowther (guitar, guitar synth), Tony March (drums)

"Fusion" was a brave concept, but it's a word that, like its contemporaries "radical feminism" and "", has virtually become a term of abuse, one notch up from "progressive rock" on the scale of avant garde non-u descriptors. Well, here are two groups fearlessly re-opening that old case and asking, "Fusion: Can it be any good?"

Of course, everyone knows that fusion could be good when it wanted to. Groups like Larry Coryell's Eleventh House, not to mention critical avatars like Electric Miles and Early Mahavishnu, were good, awfully and undeniably good. It's not just about capturing the raw energy of rock and injecting it into jazz, and it certainly isn't always just a matter of making improvised music more accessible by watering it down.

Take Rhys Chatham's disc, which starts horribly but soon settles down into a drum-n-bass-fuelled psychedelic vibe. Yes, it's terribly 1996 (or whenever) and it's much more accessible with the rattling, repetitive beatz and screaming guitar solos than it would be without them, but it's not completely shallow stuff either. It has that murky haze which much down-dirty fusion of yesteryear had. Given the directions Miles was going in before he died, we'd be very lucky indeed if he'd made a record as interesting, edgy and unresolved as this one had he survived until today.

There are fun bits, too, like the Latin rhythm which creeps into "Dots" and threatens to turn the track into a muziq-style qu-easy listening tribute, or a tabla sample on "The Boiler" which, perhaps deliberately, recalls "On the Corner". Chatham isn't the most innovative of trumpet players, but he has a lot of Miles in his gestural, sometimes offhand approach which works perfectly in this setting. Smith is hardly the guitarist he seems to think he is, being something of a Vernon Reid (great on paper, disappointing in the ears), but he contributes to the overall sludge which this record very ably sloshes around in. Hard edged maybe, but the whole thing feels suitably rusted and mucky, with none of the gleaming polish of the West Coast.

Marsh/Franklin/Crowther could hardly be more different. They're a live, free improvising trio who just happen to use electronic and amplified instruments for their sound. This is a much more jazzy and much more free-improvised set, although the connection with work that guitarists like John Abercrombie were doing in the early 70s is still very strong.

March and Franklin have worked with a role-call of British free jazzers and improv merchants. Together, they make a boiling texture into which Crowther inserts his twiddly but thoughtful guitar. Much of this is extremely busy music, but it rarely flounders, and when the trio goes for a more aerated style, as on the alarmingly-entitled "Lemon Squealer", they strongly recall the "Larks Tongues in Aspic" period of King Crimson, with its spaced-out atonal jams.

It's not really meaningful to compare these two discs, but there's plenty to contrast. Chatham's set hammers along under the steam of high-velocity drum samples, while Marsh plays a far more flexible, free jazzy card. Aside from Chatham's trumpet, and occasional hot licks from Smith, "Hard Edge" goes for texture above note choice; Franklin and Crowther like to work with notes and bounce melodic and harmonic ideas around the place. They play live, and stress that there are "no overdubs", whereas Chatham's record is in part a studio construction. It fits in with The Wire's idea of what makes a record contemporary; Marsh and Co work with an idea of instrumental performance which you can find either antiquated or time-tested, depending on how you feel about that sort of thing. Both have their own pleasures, of course.

Richard Cochrane

Vattel Cherry: Is it Because I'm Black?

(Commercial Free Jazz: CFJC0002)

Vattel Cherry (bass, percussion, voice)

F Vattel Cherry has a big, swaggering style which would fit right in with the Art Ensemble of Chicago, should Malachi Favors ever have an off-day. He seems to enjoy a funky way with rhythm which can often ramble in odd directions like a pub anecdote. Here, he's captured in a solo set playing a mixture of spirituals and his own compositions.

The recording is extremely "intimate", which is nice in a rough and ready way, although the first track is marred by some massively distorted bottom notes. But what other way is there to capture a player like this, who seems to have various bells attached to his limbs whilst playing and who clearly enjoys a down-home flavour?

Whether that flavour was intentional or just the result of using cheap equipment is hardly important: there's a semiotic effect which would totally spoil a classical recital (supposed to be pure and perfect) but which lends this set of bluesy tunes a slightly spurious "authenticity". Not that any of this is done in bad faith, but it's a part of the package, a performance which propels one into some late '60s loft session and a world of dodgy tape recorders and dodgier protest poetry. That's a Romantic notion -- we live in a different world now and although, yes, there are still racists about, jam sessions never really did solve that particular problem -- but there's nothing intrinsically wrong with it.

Whether you enjoy this record really depends on how much you enjoy that notion. The bells chink on Cherry's arms out of synch with his bass (of course they do) -- irritating or charming? Intended or not? One can't be sure about the latter, but the effect is rather jarring at times. At others, it sounds as if Cherry's whole body is bouncing up and down and the beat, a kind of flowing relay between bells and bass, becomes so irresistible one is tempted to jump up and dance.

This is a mixed session. Cherry really can't sing, and shouldn't -- the mercifully brief "Oh, Freedom" can set off howling dogs -- but he can play the bass with a thumping verve and energy which few players have any more. It's so much more common for free jazz bassists to concentrate on playing arco or otherwise working out timbral extensions that this kind of forcefully jazz- and blues-based playing has fallen into disfavour. Given better production values and perhaps an understanding duo partner (best of all, a singer), this would have been a really fine record. As it is, it's a calling card which promises much for the future.

Richard Cochrane

Gino Robair: Buddy Systems

(Meniscus: 003)

Gino Robair (percussion), Dave Barrett (reeds), Myles Boisen (guitars, CD player), John Butcher (sax), Carla Kihlstedt (violin), Tim Perkis (electronics), Dan Plonsey (clarinet), LaDonna Smith (strings, voice), Matthew Sperry (bass), Oluyemi Thomas (reeds, percussion), Otomo Yoshihide (turntables, CD players)

John Butcher: Music on Seven Occasions

(Meniscus: 004)

John Butcher (sax), Gino Robair (percussion), Alexander Frangenheim (bass), Veryan Weston (piano), Thomas Lehn (synthesiser), John Corbett (guitar), Jeb Bishop (trombone), Terri Kapsalis (violin), Fred Lonberg-Holm (cello), Michael Zerang (percussion, tubaphone)

F Vattel Cherry: For Those Who Heal

(Maraschino Music: No number)

F Vattel Cherry (bass), John Dierker (bass clarinet), Peter Hickey (bass), Blaise Siwula (alto sax), John Voigt (bass), Ras Chris (guitar, harmonica, bamboo fulte, percussion)

Albums which compile duets in varied groupings are so often unlistenable; of the good tracks, one isn't enough, and the less good ones sound as if they're there just to make up numbers. One wonders why each grouping seems to have been unable to generate enough music for a proper record, or feels one is being fed scraps from the table. The result can be a pointlessly jarring, ill-conceived release of music in the wrong format (MP3, perhaps, would be better)

The quality of the music on Gino Robair's dreadfully-entitled contribution to this dubious genre is good enough to lift it beyond the reach of these reservations, however. Dan Plonsey tears it up; Kihlstedt and Sperry come over all Arvo Part-like; Tim Perkis comes from another planet, and plays with quicksilver inventiveness. Each and every one of the fourteen tracks is a little gem. They're not too little, either (another source of potential irritation): at up to nine minutes, each one is weighty enough to gather its own momentum.

Still, though, the feeling that these sorts of records are designed as documents rather than as listening experiences persists. Overall, they can sound a bit like a singles collections, or compilation tapes. Nevertheless, this one is especially good to dip into and of particular interest to those not so familiar with the musicians featured.

Robair's disk includes a superb trio featuring John Butcher and, with pleasing symmetry, Butcher's own collection of duos with varying partners includes two with Robair. This disc, however, is organised rather differently. For a start, there are four brief but still valuable segments of Butcher solo, something he has made very much his own. Secondly, the nine different partnerships are grouped together, and the selection is clearly biased in favour of Weston and Zerang (three tracks each), then Robair (two tracks); the rest appear once only.

Presumably this is an attempt to overcome the bittiness inherent in the format. Butcher's voice is far stronger and more distinctive than Robair's, and so the battle is half won anyway because of the continuity this gives the tracks. Further, his aesthetic is sufficiently strong that the music on all of these pieces sounds, as it were, of a piece, which helps enormously. As with Robair's disc, the selection of partners is impeccable; to risk repetition, however, one yearns to hear more of each grouping, and by the time a particular partnership's working methods begin to make sense, their section is over. As with Robair's disc, the material here is extremely good and very valuable stuff to have access to, but one hopes that album-length releases from some of these sessions will become available in time.

Vattel Cherry takes a rather different and ultimately more successful approach to the format on "For Those Who Heal". Instead of wide-ranging instrumentations, he's gone for reeds-plus-bass, bass-plus-bass and bass solo. There are only eight tracks, one of which (the one with Hickey) is twenty minutes long, so there's plenty of time and space to make the music matter. All five partners are strong players in the contemporary free jazz style; Dierker a sort of melodic, laid-back Charles Gayle, Siwula weaving a flowing ballad which is pure New York, Voigt (probably the best-known name here) dishing up electrified attitude, Hickey a more angular partner who challenges Cherry with happy results.

Cherry himself is a funky player, enjoying the snap and pop of the strings against the fingerboard as much as the more conventional lines and walks of this music. His playing always seems to have a strutting, almost swaggering gait about it, cocky but warm too, perfect for a gospelly, sometimes raucous but above all blues-based jazz style. The duet with Hickey is something of a step outside this territory, but it's to his credit that they stick at it and create some dramatic, even startling music as a result.

The music on all three of these records is truly excellent. This writer would dearly love to hear albums by *any* of the featured duets. Your tolerance for hearing bits and pieces stitched together into an album, however, will probably be a matter of personal taste and patience. Of the lot, Cherry's has by far the most continuity. Perhaps we ought to be more tolerant of discontinuity, but most listening situations will not favour the bits-and-pieces approach. All three recommended with that reservation.

Richard Cochrane

Steve Cohn: Bridge over the X-Stream

([Leo](#): CDLR288)

Steve Cohn (piano, shakuhachi, hichiriki, shofar, percussion), Reggie Workman (bass, percussion), Jason Hwang (violin), Tom Varner (French horn)

Steve Cohn cuts an eccentric figure, at least on paper, with his blend of alternate music theory and Haight-Ashbury philostophising. It's certainly an eccentric choice for a multi-instrumentalist to pick piano as his main instrument when the group is working so heavily with microtones, yet somehow this often sparse but mostly jazzy chamber improv works extraordinarily well.

The group, under Cohn's direction, appear to be working with a notion of microtonality which does away with specific pitch structures entirely and opens up the whole continuum of frequencies for musical use. That sounds like old news until you hear the CD, which makes a nice distinction between pitch and timbre, distancing this sound-world from that of, say, most London-based improvisors who mangle their pitches and their articulations to create an entirely non-legitimate technique.

Instead, the members of the quartet play their notes pretty straight, and here's part of the attraction of the piano for Cohn. The idea seems to be to create complexity from freeing up just one parameter -- pitch -- and making it do all the work. It's successful the way that many of Mat Maneri's projects are: in other words, it has a disciplined kind of freedom which provokes wonderful inventiveness from its participants.

All four are, of course, pretty bankable names in the American hinterland between jazz and Euro-improv. Workman is perhaps worthy of particular mention for the way he takes his rubbery bass and steps purposefully through the minefield of notes around him, but the real pleasure here is the way the quartet as a whole seems to understand the point of this particular musical game and participates to the full.

This is a disk of purely improvised quartet music which, while having a great deal in common with what tends to be referred to as "European Free Improvisation", is really jazz -- Varner even quotes "So What" on track 2, as if to prove it. It's cool but bristly stuff, and sometimes seems to rush forwards with hardly any notes at all. Highly recommended.

Richard Cochrane

Bill Cole: The Untempered Ensemble, Duets & Solos Vol 1

([Boxholder](#): BXH001)

Bill Cole (reeds), Cooper-More (horizontal hoe-handle harp, diddley bow), Warren Smith (percussion), William Parker (bass, one track only)

Rohstoff: Fullmoonimprovisations 1999/2000 Tryllehaven

([Intuitive](#): IRCD002)

Felix Becker, Ivan Vincze, Carl Bergstrom-Nielsen, Laszlo Bela Kovacs, Patricia Roncayolo, Niseema Munk-Madsen, Daniel Briegleb, Janos Veto Lavman, Kaszon Kovacz, Mikkel Hornnes, Ervin Janos Lazar, Thomas Bredsdorff, Ildiko Ungvary (instrumentation not specified)

There is a particular approach to improvisation which can seem slightly strange when you first encounter it, although it's been around in free improv at least since the days of the AACM, and so probably since free improv existed at all. This approach finds a commonality with field recordings of "exotic" musics rather than with the studio, and seeks, one way or another, to embrace that commonality in a non-contradictory way.

Rohstoff represent one way of doing this. Most of their CD was recorded outside, in quite noisy environments and without sophisticated equipment. Although some are recognisable and familiar, most of the instruments sound either exotic or home-made. Vocal outbursts are common, too, and what with the group's tendency towards occasional pulsed rhythms and melodic-harmonic "riffs" one is rather strongly reminded of the music of the poorest and most isolated parts of West Africa. There is a sense that this music is supposed to be part of an environment both natural and, as it turns out, technological, as a railway station tannoy locates this apparently rural music in an urban setting, indeed in one of Europe's cultural centres.

This, then, is a long way from mere ethno-forgery or any attempt to reach for some authentic, "natural" way of making music. This is music which is often funny and sometimes perverse -- take the completely incongruous eleventh track, a skewed acid jazz pastiche which bears no relation to anything else on the disk, or its successor: "put you CD player on repeat", says the liner, but the effect is just that you hear the same, perfectly complete piece over and over again. Bizarrely compelling, these recordings dig down into something conceptually very deep in the free improv tradition, but they're musically lively enough to be much more than just ideas. The Copenhagen scene is a rich one, and the arrival of new label Intuitive to document it is most welcome.

Bill Cole is also working in an area clearly influenced by field recordings, although it's hard to imagine a more different record from Rohstoff's. Cole is a composer whose music allows plenty of space for improvisation; he is also an expert performer on a range of double-reed instruments, flutes and other things you blow into, and his playing and compositional styles clearly indicate a long and profound study of middle-Eastern and North African musics.

Here we find him solo (on Western flute and then on the Middle-Eastern Shenai) and in duet with Cooper-Moore, Smith and Parker. Cooper-Moore's self-made African instruments are a revelation; the harp has a piercingly beautiful, light sound, while the diddley-bow sounds like an infinitely flexible bass guitar, played slap-style, of course. The former is paired with Cole on didgeridoo, while for the second he switches again to shenai. In effect, this means that they swap accompanying duties between the two tracks, and the results are extremely lovely. Cole's shenai is dazzlingly felicitous, something like Braxton but with far fewer roots in jazz

The same pattern holds for duets with Smith. In the first, Cole's Tibetan trumpet provides a weird, meandering undercurrent for Smith's spacious gong solo; Cole switches back to shenai and Smith to the drum kit for their second pieces, a melodic workout which free jazz fans will find perfectly recognisable.

There's only one duet with Parker (a second one will appear on Volume 2, out later this year), but it's a treat. They play the melody with wonderful flexibility, and the arco bass blends perfectly with the Chinese piri, leading to an often frantically inventive jam. Overall, the solos are lovely, but just a bit less edgy and exciting than the duets, as if Cole benefits strongly from the interaction.

Cole is clearly a superb player, and is making a kind of music which tends to be looked down on as a novelty act. It may well be hard to categorise, but it's hugely rewarding to listen to. Recommended.

Richard Cochrane

James Coleman: Zuihitsu

([Sedimental](#): SEDCD30)

James Coleman (theremin), Greg Kelley (trumpet), Tatsuya Nakatani (percussion), Vic Rawlings (cello, sarangi, electronics), Bhob Rainey (saxophone), Liz Tonne (voice), The Undr Quartet

This isn't quite what it looks like from the lineup; a sextet session, that is. Indeed, there isn't a single track on which all six musicians appear. Instead, Coleman has arranged for them to feature in an ever-changing sequence of duets and trios, with the Undr Quartet augmenting quartets on two tracks only. The pieces are all brief, free-form improvisations characterised by lots of space.

Coleman himself is a very restrained player, and his instrument only serves to emphasise the gestural nature of his style. Like all thereminists, he sometimes uses a wide vibrato and slides into notes with big swooping movements. He does not, however, have much use for the sustained sounds to which the instrument lends itself so well; he likes brief, quick, almost percussive interventions which are often rather subtle.

Regular readers will be familiar with the excellent work of Rainey and Kelley, about whom little need be added here; this is a great situation for Kelley, and Rainey does superb things with the mere two tracks he gets here. These are a pair of really exciting practitioners whose sheer understatement, particularly in Rainey's case, can make them easy to overlook. Here they make wonderful music with Coleman, but you really have to listen to hear it. "Zwittering Maschine" really does sound like the weird, angular, comical little birds in Klee's painting; Rainey absolutely plays his socks off.

That's the theme with the disc as a whole, in fact. Vic Rawlings is perhaps Coleman's most up-front collaborator (being a member of Jonathon LaMaster's [Saturnalia](#), he's used to boistrous music-making), but even he is restrained, seeming to think very carefully about every sound he makes. His contribution to "Muddy Kemaris" seems to give the very spread-out ribs of this music a backbone to hang off.

Vocalist Liz Tonne has the open-mouthed tone of a classical singer, but here she's all whispers, mutterings and the tiniest of nocturnal sounds. Nakatani, who has worked with Kelley and Rainey as Nmperign and with Rawlings in Saturnalia, augments his pattering percussion with bowed cymbals, which on the face of things shouldn't suit this environment; they do because he doesn't really use them for sustained sound at all.

Coleman has done well to pull such strong musicians together and yet make this potentially fragmentary format work. Instead of sounding like a mix tape, as these things sometimes can, this album feels like the sum of parts which all go together. The fact that these musicians work with and understand one another is obviously a great help. These folks could give anyone in Europe a run for their money when it comes to so-called European improvisation. Beautiful and, above all, understated music which is not afraid to do just what's necessary. If you don't yet know these musicians, here is a nice way to discover them.

Richard Cochrane

This review first appeared in Hollow Ear magazine DARREN COPELAND-- Rendu Visible (Diffusion i Media: IMED9841)

Darren Copeland (tape compositions)

Copeland exclusively uses environmental sounds to the exclusion of "musical" sound-sources, even referring to conventional musicality as a "paradigmatic and parental authority". Dreaming of a day when cognitive science (or something) will enable the creation of a "phonography", which would presumably be analogous to representational painting rather than photography, Copeland is not naive enough to imagine that day has dawned. Understanding that a composer may write a love song which the listener finds frightening rather than romantic, he has composed, under duress, some music for us.

Copeland has a lot of interesting conceptual stuff to say about the phenomenology of sound, but is the music any good? Well, it's certainly uncompromising, but it isn't as clumsy as the notion of an aural depiction of events in the world might lead one to believe. Rather than trying to paint a picture, Copeland presents the listener with Rorschach blots which are intended to fire the imagination, to stimulate the mind's eye rather than pass it information. As a result, and very acutely aware of his position vis-a-vis his declared project, what comes out has many points of contact with more conventional musics. Indeed, because of his intention to stimulate, not represent, Copeland tends to shy away from recognisable sounds and create weird fusions, sounds which are a combination of, say, rain falling, hissing steam and radio static (as at the opening of "Night Camera", first movement).

The resulting ambiguity is delicious, when it works well; it's impossible not to conjure up mental images, because the music is so reminiscent of other sounds, but just because of that it can suddenly change direction, leaving you standing, not in a rainstorm, but in a large industrial space (say). All of which makes listening to Rendu Visible an interesting experience indeed. This writer's only complaint -- being a fan of music and not sharing Mr Copeland's characterisation of either it or phonography, its white-hatted counterpart -- is that these pieces do go on a bit. More variation would have been more stimulating; or is the New Science of Phonography to make mouldy figgess of us all?

Richard Cochrane

John Corbett and Heavy Friends: I'm Sick about my Hat

([Atavistic](#): ALP1116CD)

John Corbett (guitars, montages, voice), Jane Baxter Miller (voice, one track only), Peter von Bergen (reeds, one track only), Jeb Bishop (trombone, one track only), Hamid Drake (percussion, one track only), David Grubbs (voice, one track only), Mats Gustafsson (reeds, voice), Terri Kapsalis (voice, one track only), Fred Lonberg-Holm (cello)

Although there are eight "heavy friends" on the credits here, this record is entirely Corbett's show. His guitar and his tape or turntable montages dominate every track, and the results are, well, slippery. The setting is familiar enough: studio ambiance, clunky acoustic guitar playing skewed white-boy blues, cut-n-paste micro-sampling, a few blasts of free jazz sax, a large dollop of bad FM reception and some crackly old vinyl for added aura. But far from a kind of souped-up industrial improv, "I'm Sick..." delivers something very weird indeed.

For a start, apparently straightforward tracks like "Ready Kilowatt" -- Gustafsson and bone-man Bishop wig out over Drake's drums -- turn out ugly, lumpen and awkward. Drake plays a mid-tempo rock rhythm and Corbett doctors their performance with some extremely intrusive processing, as if demonstrating his new effects unit to a friend, or as if working against any expectations that we might have had of this being a nice quartet blowing piece.

We oughtn't to have had those preconceptions by that stage, because we've already had "Parapoli Rosa E.", whose title sounds like something by Duchamp and which lives up to it. A cacophony of out-of-tune vocal and violin samples from somewhere in the Indian subcontinent are underpinned by a faltering fifth-root bass line clunked out on Corbett's guitar like a beginner playing country and western. It feels nihilistic, a deliberate deprettifying of several things at once, like beating up Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan with a fake hookah bought from Neal's Yard. Just as one is becoming accustomed to it, and beginning to feel an uneasy solidarity with what might be a sardonic attack on Western ethno-fetishism, it turns all lovely, with the layered samples briefly forming neat, orchestral mesh. What does it mean now? That's anybody's guess.

Exhibit number three might be "Cold Sweat", on which he has Terri Kapsalis recite a stream of James Brown clichés through a George Clintonesque wrong-speed voice. Her diction gradually becomes slightly menacing. Is this a crude pastiche of pop's recycling mentality, or an incredibly sophisticated pastiche of such crude pastiches? Maybe, at an even higher level of irony, it's a genuine tribute. Or is it just crap?

This record is either brilliant or terrible depending largely on your frame of mind. It's bitty, ugly, irritating and gawky. Yet, for the determined postmodernist, there are enough tremulous layers of possible meaning to keep one amused, wondering with a wry smile whether Corbett is really intoning that toe-curlingly purple paragraph by Clark Coolidge because he likes it or because he thinks it's funny. Who knows?

Richard Cochrane

Lol Coxill: Toverbal Sweet... Plus

(Mushroom: SEECD480)

Lol Coxhill (reeds), Pierre Courbois (drums, percussion), Jasper Van't Hof (electric and acoustic pianos)

Lol Coxhill, adenoidal soprano saxist and the very personification of struggle and integrity in the UK's early improvised music scene, was blowing up a storm in 1972, when this album was first released. Within a few minutes he has reminded us how beautifully he can play, and also how weirdly and with what ferocity and slapstick self-delfation, and how he was doing all of this twenty five years ago as he continues to do today.

The recording is from a gig in Holland. Production values are negligible -- whether you find stereo panning tricks irritating or charming is largely a matter of inscrutable taste, like beetroot -- and reissuing on CD, as is so often the case, makes little sense except economically. The "...Plus" is a twenty-minute, multitracked piece by Coxhill alone, created to beef up the reissue for CD and veritably dripping audiophile quality by comparison.

The new solo piece works well. He recorded the parts while listening to the original album, presumably to give some consistency to the music, but what you hear is a different man. His tone is warmer and more assured, his melodic sense crafted and less likely to spiral into chromatic patterns than in 1972. He has realised the counterpoint with care, something which multitracked improvisations often fall foul of, and still uses few of the techniques normally associated with "improv". Musical progress is more than apparent, but the two Coxhills are equally likeable, the earlier version more than making up for a lack of sophistication with virtuosic technique, gritty emotivity and a perverse sense of direction which often seems to raise a smile from Van't Hof.

The latter is a fine pianist, and should be better-known, doubtless a victim of Jazz snobbery about electronic keyboards. On this session, he spends a lot of time playing with left hand only, a clunking bass line which bouys up Coxhill's furious imagination. Courbois keeps up admirably without stretching beyond the familiar, and remains a pretty anonymous presence in such estimable company. But this is the horn player's album (coy remarks about a "combined effort" notwithstanding) and Coxhill acquits himself remarkably.

What is strange, hearing him now, is how little jazz there is in his playing, even in such company as this. In 1972, there was no defined "improv scene" as there was ten years later; this was a music that was being born, and its gene pool in those days owed a great deal to the New Thing. There is almost nothing to connect this recording with the heaven-threatening jazz coming from the other side of the Atlantic, however -- perhaps a pinch of 'Trane, but it's the big man's Indian affiliations, not his hard bop roots, which seem to touch Coxhill. Sourly linear, this is more influenced by European folk, and it is easier on the evidence of this album alone to place Coxhill alongside Surman and Garbarek than Brötzmann or Evan Parker. Still, there is an abstract glint in his eye and, with the benefit of hindsight, his future direction can certainly be heard here.

Richard Cochrane

Lol Coxhill: Alone and Together

([Emanem](#): 4034)

Lol Coxhill (saxophones), Stevie Wishart (violin, hurdy gurdy), Marcio Mattos (cello, electronics) (one track only)

Lol Coxhill has come a long way since Joni Mitchell saw a "one man band by the quick lunch stand" and felt touched by the sincerity and integrity which free improvised music has always represented. Today he has an international reputation, and his position in the history books seems assured. Although he can be overshadowed by the massive presence of Evan Parker, to whose music his own bears a superficial resemblance, Coxhill's playing is distinctively different from the younger man's and it would be a crime to under-value it.

This disc compiles several sessions too short to be released independently: three duets with Stevie Wishart, one with Mattos and the entirety of Coxhill's performance at the 1999 LMC festival. This latter is surely the centrepiece of the release, a twenty-two-minute extemporisation on soprano, the member of the saxophone family with which he is most closely associated. Far from the nods to Lacy which soprano specialists usually find themselves making, Coxhill's music seems to take Sonny Rollins's motivic style and bring it up-to-date with a wonderful fluidity and a tendency to embrace multiphonics, high harmonics and other "extended" techniques as a part of the melodic flow. It's an impressive, virtuoso performance which, however, doesn't over-egg Coxhill's technical prowess, which he hardly has to prove at this late stage.

The festival solo is jazzy, but it is above all lyrical. At times it can touch on harsher territory, but always in the service of the line, a line which Coxhill spins out with enormous invention over a long period, something which is extremely hard to do but which this veteran solo performer seems to carry off with ease. The other extended solo on this release forms the last track from the session at which the Wishart duets were recorded way back in 1991, this time on sopranino. His voice on the instrument is thin and reedy, without the penetrating tone of the larger horn, but his musical imagination is very much intact, again taking a linear approach, following the notes and embellishing them with sometimes rather squeaky timbral effects.

Wishart's hurdy gurdy greatly dignifies one of their duets; it makes a wonderful sound, and her development of a variety of articulations means she is able to provide droning backdrops and incisive commentary at the same time, something which benefits Coxhill no end. It's a beautiful and very unusual track; the two featuring violin are more spikey but no less musical. Here, Wishart's styrofoam timbres often coax Coxhill -- who's locked into a pinched tone anyway -- into less melodic waters, pushing the percussive and gratingly nasty sounds of the sopranino to the fore.

That said, he never abandons note-based playing entirely, and Wishart's fiddle, although it certainly doesn't sound pretty, has a quick intelligence which keeps the music rushing along. These performances are faster-moving and more rooted in the conventions of free improv than the others on this album, but there's no loss of clever, thoughtful interplay. When Coxhill switches back to soprano on the second violin duo, it's something of a relief, his rubbery, frenetic sopranino quite suddenly giving way to something altogether more rounded and elegant.

Mattos only appears for one, thirteen-minute track. He's spectacular on either bass or cello, one of the fastest, most furiously restless players in London, and his time with Coxhill is extremely well-spent. The electronics work well, and overall this track has something approaching an ensemble sound. Exciting, fast-talking improvisation which is completely accomplished and realised with fearsome precision.

Richard Cochrane

Carlo Actis Dato: The Moonwalker

([Leo](#): CDLR311)

Carlo Actis Dato (reeds)

Edoardo Marraffa: Solo

([Bassesferec](#): BS005)

Edoardo Marraffa (tenor sax)

Two solo discs; one by an acknowledged master of the Italian music scene and one from a lesser-known name. Both, as it turns out, shy away from complete abstraction, turning often to quite traditional jazz concerns, although both are interested in the extended techniques of the avant garde. Both CDs take the view that playing solo doesn't have to mean rambling on for hours, which is a good thing. Here, as they say, the similarities pretty much end.

Dato's disk contains an astonishing 30 tracks, although this isn't quite as it seems because a third of them are tiny bits of found sound -- radio shots and field recordings -- which are presumably supposed to be redolent of some nonspecific third world country in which the reedsman would have us believe his roots can be found. It really is true that Dato is powerfully influenced by Middle Eastern and North African musics, but Indonesia? Japan? What have these to do with his music? One suspects they're there just to provide a whiff of the generically exotic. As decontextualised fragments they're certainly not musically very interesting, and they bear no discernable relation to what Dato is doing for the rest of the CD.

These interruptions aside, however, Dato turns in a disciplined set of brief performances here, almost all of them up-beat tunes with strong rhythmic components, very funky but also rather slight. One yearns to hear him develop the melodies a bit (which he only occasionally allows himself space to do) and, with such danceable material, he really seems to feel the absence of drums and a bass. Above all, one wants to sample these superb performances of very catchy tunes and give them some beef. Much as he may like the image of the street musician busking out songs in Marrakesh or Katmandu, the affectation isn't convincing and he'd be better off concentrating on the things which he can do extraordinarily well when the mood takes him. The playing here is of fine quality and no mistake, but the conception is flawed, marring some of the good work Dato puts into it.

Marraffa's album is bitty in a completely different way. His repertoire ranges from the extreme avant noise camp right through to a passable impersonation of Lester Young, so a vocabulary statement like this one is bound to be a bit varied. The more extreme stuff is, frankly, a bit posed and artificial-sounding, and Marraffa is, at times, certainly not in control of the things which come out of his horn. This willingness to push at the edge of his technique, however, can easily obscure the fact that he really can play, with a range of big, breathy tenor sounds, both straight and avant, which are both accomplished and rather personal. He does need some polish, but that will come; he already has bags of character, which is the hard bit, after all.

The straighter tracks are much more bizarre, but they do reveal one of his most distinctive qualities -- his preference for constructing quite long melodic ideas and punctuating them with silences. Put next to Dato's driving, riff-based style of playing, it's quite a contrast.

Inevitably, the most successful moments here are those when the two sides of the saxophonist's personality meet, as on the very impressive "Il Sogno Di Una Cosa", which fuses his smoochy jazz style with a set of articulations which resemble tearing metal. Lots of promising things here; Marraffa's is a name to look out for.

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Richard Cochrane

Day & Taxi: About (Percaso: 17)

Christoph Gallio (soprano and alto sax), Dominique Girod (bass), Dieter Ulrich (drums)

Having been around for over a decade, this Swiss-based trio plays intelligent jazz with a loose, supple feel. The compositions -- all but one are by Gallio -- move with a gentle lope through large intervallic leaps and mild dissonances, although they often mix metres to excellent effect. These provide jumping-off points for improvisations which are firmly based on the solo-plus-accompaniment model but which are just as firmly removed from considerations of changes playing or modal forms. This is, as John Corbett implies in his uncharacteristically sketchy sleeve notes, creative music which remembers its own history without being enslaved to it.

Gallio's tone is nasal but light, as if he were playing some kind of Middle-Eastern oboe. His playing is angular but always logical, and rarely prone to fireworks. Indeed, Gallio seems to prefer to follow notes around at a leisurely pace, with his slow vibrato and tendency to scoop his notes up and toss them into the air. This doesn't mean he avoids extremes, however; indeed, he's clearly well-versed in the more "extended" techniques available on the saxophone. He uses them sparingly, integrating them into his playing with the intention of creating an organic connection with his straighter style. It works. On "Lindsay's New Tune", Gallio can be heard mixing up all kinds of techniques without ever dropping the thread he so carefully spins out when playing.

Girod sounds full and sumptuous here, and his playing is always full of ideas. Virtually everything he plays, even the most casual gesture, has a studied funkiness about it; virtually every bar could be a riff in its own right. When he picks up the bow, he takes a more abstract turn (as is so often the case), but never turns his back completely on the melodic and rhythmic world which the trio likes to inhabit. Fortunately, he gets a lot of solo space, playing alongside Ulrich, whose springy rhythms suit him perfectly. Mostly Ulrich plays time, but he does so with such a relaxed swing that often it's implied rather than stated, or else the ride cymbal provides the only apparent reference-point in a swirl of complex but seemingly effortless polyrhythms.

This is a sharp, clever trio who can play this rather quiet sort of free jazz -- rather than the energy music which is so popular among revivalists today -- with absolute conviction, making it feel very contemporary. Gallio especially is a player who I hope we'll hear more from in the future.

Richard Cochrane

Day & Taxi: Less and More

([Percaso](#): UTR4121CD)

Christoph Gallio (saxophones), Dominique Girod (bass), Dieter Ulrich (drums)

The oddly-named Day & Taxi are a regular trio playing somewhere between cool and free, and hence occupying much the same territory as Steve Lacy, to whom Gallio is most easily compared. Gallio is indeed a soft-toned soprano player, something of a rarity on the notoriously intransigent horn. His compositions have some of the complexity disguised by whistfulness which Lacy seems to enjoy so much, too.

This disc is substantially similar to their [previous Percaso release](#), as polished and accessible a disc of non-harmonic jazz as you're likely to find, with a pleasingly live and spontaneous sound (both records are beautifully produced). Gallio is all melody, with no apparent interest in chord structures at all, something which strongly distances him from Lacy, and often, as on tracks like the ballad "Ann's Tune", he's happy as Larry turning out unprepossessing linear gestures with a rather diffident phrasing.

Put him in a quicker tempo and Gallio can cook, in his own way. He rarely resorts to noodles, and his playing can take you unawares just because his tone is so smooth and seems to gently coax rather than forcing the issue. Quite without knowing how it happened, you may well find yourself engrossed by one of these solos, which start so softly-spoken. A very attractive way of working, and one which is hard to keep up, because the temptation in such unrestricted surroundings must be to open up and yell out from time to time.

Girod and Ulrich continue to provide stirring support for Gallio's poetic musings. There's less solo space for them here than on the previous release, which is sort of a shame, but it might mark a part of the maturing process. Perhaps the trio as a whole no longer feels that individual solos are so important, and that the act of "comping" can be just as musically satisfying. Certainly Gallio's solos are often understated enough to allow his colleagues to stretch out and come into prominence. At its best -- and that's pretty often -- this group can elevate all of its constitutive voices to the same level of importance, and that's a rare thing in any jazz, though it's almost universally sought after.

Richard Cochrane

J A Deane: Out of Context

([Zerx](#): 013)

J A Deane (conducting, electronics, bass flute), Stefan Dill (guitars), Steve Feld (euphonium). Tom Guralnick (soprano sax, electronics), Katie Harlow (cello), Rod Harrison (acting), Joseph Sabella (drums), Courtney Smith (harp), Alicia Ultan (viola), Jefferson Voorhees (drums), Mark Weaver (tuba)

It's not often that people try conduction; it's an odd endeavour, after all. You take a fairly large group of good-quality improvising musicians, who have spent much of their careers developing their own voices with which to express their own ideas. You then make them take their cues from one person, the conductor, who tells them, by means of a series of gestures, what they ought to be doing. There's a huge ego problem to be overcome there, and also the question of why one would bother; this disk's ensembles of eight or nine are hardly orchestras, and could doubtless make competent music without the aid of a baton.

Well, that may all be true, but conduction does create a completely different kind of music from group improvisation. The semi-orchestral textures which can be obtained from the technique are nigh-on impossible without a conductor. The conductor must be a good one, of course, but Deane is, and the music here doesn't falter for a moment.

The disk contains three pieces spanning over two years, and each has its own flavour. The first is a sweeping, delicate piece which would work as a soundtrack or a piece for dance; for this listener, it was the high spot. The second is dominated by the presence of Rod Harrison, reading a weird collage of Marat/Sade, "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory" and a selection of other texts, his voice ducking in and out of the music which swirls around him like rough water, threatening to drown him out but never competing too strongly. It works much better than one might have imagined, although Harrison does get rather excitable at times, and it's a pretty confrontational performance. The third is more textural, with a dark, amorphous quality; it requires a little more work from the listener, but rewards it well enough.

The performances documented here are quite different from Butch Morris's, and quite different from one another. Anyone with an interest in conduction would be well-advised to seek it out; this is top-quality stuff, from a practitioner who ought to be better known, and it's pretty clear that there are some strong talents on the sharp end of the baton, too. Good stuff, but not (apart from the first track) easy listening.

Richard Cochrane

Matt Turner: The Mouse that Roared

(Meniscus: MNSCS002)

Matt Turner (cello)

Matthew Goodheart: Songs from the Time of Great Questioning

(Meniscus: MNSCS001)

Matthew Goodheart (piano)

Dan DeCellis: Chamber Music

([Sachimay](#): SCA9350)

Dan DeCellis (piano), James Coleman (theremin), Anita DeCellis (voice), Katt Fernandez (violin), Gary Fieldman (percussion)

Leandre/Occhipinti: Incandescences

(Tonesetters: TS007)

Joelle Leandre (bass), Giorgio Occhipinti (piano)

Pianists often seem to have the weight of the classical tradition on their shoulders, just like saxophonists have the jazz greats looking over theirs. Here are releases which, in different ways, seem to engage with that tradition without being weighed down by it.

Although Occhipinti is a young jazz pianist, his playing here with Leandre has strongly classical, ven Classical, resonances. The whole thing can often sound like a sonata for double bass and piano, conceived by a delirious Hindemith. If that doesn't sound much like a compliment, it is. These two create wonderfully rich chordal structures, finding a place somewhere between functional harmony, jazz and atonality with not a note agreed in advance.

Occhipinti is great at varying the levels of density in his playing, a concept which his partner for this session understands only too well. And just as the music can range from big, loud chording to light, detailed playing, so it also covers the ground between the melodic and almost soothing right through to (occasional) blasting or insectoid improv. Those who don't know this pianist's work are urged to check this out; it's very impressive, and Leandre, always a valuable duettist, works wonderfully with him throughout.

Dan DeChellis, on the other hand, takes his classical influence sufficiently to heart as to refer to what he does as "Chamber Music", and to call himself a "composer". This group of three improvisations certainly has a strong whiff of Boulez about it, a kind of crepuscular quiet having crept over even the noisier parts, of which there are rather few.

Instead, Anita DeChellis's impeccable soprano bobs and weaves in an environment rather like that of the magnificent Pli Selon Pli, all tiny gestures which seem to join up, across the delicious gaps, to create something distantly related to melodic lines. Special mention should also go to Coleman's fantastically melodramatic theremin, sounding more like Messiaen's Ondes Mertenot in these settings than the sci-fi camp it usually conjures up.

Matthew Goodheart also sounds as if he has a debt to Boulez, but this time to his intense Piano Sonatas rather than his often spare chamber music. Goodheart's compositions (for so they are called) are frenetic, in-your-face Modernism, pin-sharp and bristling with detail. There's always plenty of detail to be heard in this kind of music, of course.

Where Goodheart does well is in coming out of the academic concern with structure and micro-level formal ideas and onto the level of the dramatic. Goodheart's music builds into surging crescendoes one moment, is glimpsed enticingly behind veils of chromatic noise the next. Doubtless Boulez and his coterie would have found such things hopelessly quaint and nostalgic, but they seem more contemporary now that the old "big ideas" have had their day. There is also a jazzy piece devoted to Ornette (not at all bad) and a piano interior piece (surprisingly funky), but what Goodheart does best is what he does most of the time here: atonal music of a pleasingly forceful clarity.

Richard Cochrane

Dan deChellis's Chamber Ensemble: With More than a Passing Interest

([Sachimay](#): No Number)

Dan deChellis (piano), Katt Hernandez (violin), Gary Fieldman (percussion), Anita deChellis (voice), James Coleman (theremin)

Dan deChellis and Philip Tomasic: As If To Remind Us

([Sachimay](#): No Number)

Dan deChellis (piano), Philip Tomasic (guitar)

DeChellis is one of many improvising musicians who feel close to the "new music" tradition despite the obvious absence of through-composition in his work. He does, however, organise his music somewhat in advance, using a variety of strategies which are less interesting than the results themselves.

"With More..." (don't be put off by the titles) is an album of quintet improvisations led by deChellis and all of medium-long duration (9-15 mins). The performers play it pretty straight, and you could be forgiven for thinking this was a contemporary classical disc except perhaps for Hernandez's violin, which has a ronsiny, unfinished sound.

Inevitably, these pieces are dominated by Anita deChellis's vocal performances, which are fortunately extremely robust, lively affairs. She enjoys improvvising with sounds, but she's quite capable of belting out a few big notes, which is sometimes just what this sort of thing calls for. She is, however, often willing to melt into the ensemble to give the others space to move.

Space is, indeed, one of the defining virtues of this music. It never feels crowded; deChellis, one way or another, has found a way to replicate the kind of layered, perforated sound which chamber groups get when playing, say, Boulez. This is tough to do in improvised music and credit is due both to him as the arranger and to the individual players.

Hernandez's tone is indeed a bit out of place, if the place is a classical ensemble. Of course it isn't, and she sounds great; a strong feature at the opening of track two reveals a splendidly imaginative, singing style with enormous sensitivity to the effects of microtonal movements of pitch on what her fellow musicians are doing.

Hernandez and deChellis are, almost of necessity, the most note-oriented of these five. Anita deChellis is situated between them and the determinedly non-pitched world of Fieldman or the ever-gliding sounds of Coleman's theremin.

Fieldman is the most conventionally "improv" of the lot, although it's hard to see how he could be otherwise; his contributions provide a reminder of this music's slightly bizarre hybrid state. Coleman swoops around this music with the kind of control and intelligence which isn't easy to attain on this hard-to-make-much-of instrument. Far from being a mere sound-effects guy, Coleman plays real music here.

The four pieces represented here have all the calm rapturousness of really good modernist vocal music. They are Romantic the way Schoenberg or Boulez is Romantic, and they are truly wonderful things. Whether composition or improvisation is the best way to achieve them will continue to be a vexed question, but deChellis adds to the mounting case for the latter's viability.

The music on "As If To Remind Us" isn't much like this. DeChellis still plays with his rather serious, legit phrasing, but duo partner Tomasic sounds nothing like a recitalist.

He's an explosive player (they both are), very dynamic and full of slightly twisted articulations. DeChellis is a hard, crisp pianist and Tomasic fizzles and pops around him with an almost mischievous lightness of touch. The contrast is immediately likeable; DeChellis's hammered notes against the sly indirection of the guitar.

Tomasic makes much use of the tremolo bar to create swooping or wavering glissandi. His overall approach is almost speech-like and certainly not the kind of scrabbly stuff one often hears from avant guitarists too lazy to develop an interesting technique. His partner plays the piano with intense concentration. His language is one of clusters, rushing chromatic splashes and thumping dissonances along with calmer, more reflective stuff, but a more different player from Cecil Taylor, to whom all such players must by some unwritten law be compared, could hardly be wished for. Abandoning the sort of thematic development of which Taylor is a master, and untroubled by the harmonic underpinning of jazz, deChellis is following an entirely different route.

These discs, released on DeChellis's own Sachimay label, are efficiently but unglamorously packaged (laser-printed inserts, sticky labels on the CDs), but such releases do offer the opportunity to hear exactly what the musicians wanted, with no interference and, perhaps more importantly, no pressure, real or perceived, to deliver anything other than the music they wanted to play. Both are superb, better indeed than many similar things which will come out in more glamorous packages over the coming months. Inside these is some real substance.

Delbecq, Benoit: Pursuit

([Songlines](#): SGL11529-2)

Benoit Delbecq (piano), Francois Houle (clarinet), Michael Moore (reeds), Jean-Jacques Avenel (bass), Steve Arguelles (drums, electronics), Marc Ducret (guitar, one track only)

Petit, Didier: NOHC on the Road

([Leo Records](#): CD065)

Daunik Lazro (saxophones), Denis Colin (bass clarinet), Michael Nick (violin), Didier Petit (cello, voice)

Kaufmann, Achim: Double Exposure

([Leo Records](#): CDLR289)

Michael Moore (reeds), John Schroder (guitar), John Hollenbeck (drums), Achim Kaufmann (piano)

People will, it seems, continue to insist that jazz isn't dead for some time to come, and as long as they make music as good as this, who can complain? These three records are all firmly within the jazz tradition; rather than fusing it with something else, they all, in different ways, aim to develop interesting little ideas buried deep within it.

Take Kaufmann's quartet, part of what appears to be a recent rediscovery of cool jazz, with its pools of languid sound and its clever, by no means atonal but often rather weird-sounding harmonies. There's much here that jazz fans will have heard before, but much to enjoy, too. The compositions are a bit of a weak link -- they're plagued by bebop cliches and rather clunky avantgardisms -- but the quartet are a strong improvising unit and the solo sections are easy to like.

Kaufmann's piano is a surprisingly forceful presence on these tracks, picking out notes with a strength which belies the relative repose of much of the music. His solos seem to abandon any chord structures pretty quickly, discovering his own little harmonic niches and keeping bassist Schroder on his toes in the process. Moore has a preference for meditative playing, as on the final "Sphericals", where he leads the clarinet into an almost whimsical pastorello. He can do up-beat, but when he does it's a more bluesy, boppish figure he cuts; his solo on "Double Exposure" could almost have come from Charlie Mariano or any other of a legion of top-drawer Blakey or Mingus sidemen. In other words, it's good stuff, but it's a little surprising to hear someone playing that way in this day and age.

And that's a question-mark which hangs over this whole session, and many others like it. If it had been recorded in 1960, it would be considered prescient, daring and terribly exciting. In 2000, it sounds just a little retro. There are good things here -- Kaufmann's playing is most of them, actually, but Moore has a lovely take on that sweet-sour Giuffre sound which is also worth catching -- but it's the ballads which really work and the up-tempo numbers like "Pea Head" and the title track are, really, just bland modal jazz-funk which Schroder livens up somewhat but which are otherwise entirely forgettable. A shame, because there's much to be impressed by here when the tempo cools down.

Moore also appears as a member of Delbecq's quintet, and the music here, although in some ways coming from similar roots, is altogether different. Delbecq is a pianist who will already be known to many readers, as will clarinetist Houle (with whom Moore shares a lot of common ground); this group has the muscular sophistication which Kaufmann's quartet sometimes lacks.

One thing which is immediately striking is that, while this is free jazz with the see-saw rhythm most often associated with Cecil Taylor's small-group work, there's a very up-front contemporary angle supplied by Steve Arguelles's electronics. No shy background noises or occasional percussive samples here -- the swoop of them fills some of the best moments here, transforming a fairly old-fashioned kind of playing into something quite original.

The compositions here fall prey to standard jazz patterns at times, just as Kaufmann's do. One wonders whether this is deliberate -- a way to make the music more accessible by framing it with something familiar -- or whether composing well these days is just so hard that most people tend to turn in indifferent efforts. As with the Kaufmann disk, then, this is one where the solo or ensemble improvisations tend to be more impressive than the heads. Indeed, and in common with many projects like this, it's often the comping which is most impressive, with Avenel, Arguelles and Delbecq often more interesting than what Houle (a player of real daring and imagination) or Moore play on top of them.

Delbecq is not a pianist to dismiss, whatever you make of his rather watery compositions here: his is a genuinely elegant reappraisal of the last forty years of free jazz piano. It would be good to hear him in more challenging settings than this one, where he is, after all, playing his own compositions, mostly in the company of familiar friends. The first track of "Pursuit" makes a tantalising promise which the rest of the record doesn't really fulfil; it's complicated, flowing, uneasy. There isn't enough of this sort of thing here, but what there is is excellent stuff.

Didier Petit offers a taste of it in the outstanding *NOHC on the Road*. The least jazzy of the three disks considered here, it still has close connections to the tradition, but it also takes account of European-style free improv. The line-up is unconventional, too -- two reeds, two strings -- and it's to their credit that such logical, intelligent music comes out of what could have been a very ordinary impro-jam.

While this, perhaps inevitably, has connections with Eastern European music (Nick's ecstatic violin) and the Classical avant garde, the real progenitor here is Ayler, and it's always nice to see Ayler's legacy re-emerging in peculiar ways. Here it's the soaring folk music he played to incomprehending audiences of beatniks to which NOHC pays tribute, particularly in the opening track, "The Progressive Slide into Pleasure", a track which makes you slowly stand up as you listen to it, like an auditory Alexander technique.

Lazro plays more jazz licks than his companions, and that actually helps here, in this otherwise rather distant offspring of the music. "The Missing Mass", for instance, has him intoning not unlike Ornette Coleman playing with strings, an almost bell-like tolling of phraseology which grounds the funereal movement beneath. Funeral march and pentecostal ecstasy: these are the two poles of this album, as they were for Ayler's music. Exciting, at times spine-tingling stuff. Highly recommended.

Richard Cochrane

Bertrand Denzler Cluster: Y?

([Leo Lab](#) : CD053)

Bertrand Denzler (tenor sax), Benoit Delbecq (piano and prepared piano), Helene Labarriere (bass), Norbert Pfammatter (drums and percussion)

It's good, old-fashioned, American-style free jazz, this, or it would be if Delbecq didn't refuse to make things quite so easy. His playing is slightly reminiscent of Paul Bley's, using go-anywhere suspensions which are open enough to give freedom of movement to Denzler's tenor, creating a slow-moving thread through the wildest portions of the set. That means the group can often stop dead and, using him as a pivot, as it were, launch off in a completely different direction. His drone-based solo on the otherwise furious "Now" is worthy of special note; pure, light-fingered loveliness in an unexpected place.

Labarriere's bass owes a lot to William Parker, easily integrating a range of extended sounds with the atonal walk so typical of the music of the late '60s. Meanwhile, Pfammatter's muscular drumming keeps the music buoyed up on a crisp ride cymbal and pushes it along with exaggerated press rolls; both players take barnstorming solos. Denzler himself pitches in with an updated version of Archie Shepp's blustering style; his technique is pretty straight in free improv terms, but he has a lot to say in his solos and he's able to sustain a level of compressed energy extremely convincingly.

Perhaps unusually in this kind of music, Denzler's compositions are actually rather good; it can be so easy, after all, to wind up with a series of ham-fisted blowing vehicles or contrived stop-start novelties. Instead, Denzler seems able to contribute tunes which are worth performing rather than formalities which politeness dictates must be got out of the way before the real playing gets started. In the slow number here, for example, the join between the head and the solo is made invisible by Denzler's completely assured ballad playing.

This group neatly updates the old New Thing with some added European finesse. If it's not quite so hyperactive as some of the manifestations of free jazz which are around these days, it's by no means tame and it makes up for it by executing these quirks with vigorous commitment. Take Delbecq's prepared piano on the title track -- it proves not only he understands piano preparation (a rare enough thing in itself) but also that he can make it work with Denzler's Coltraneish melody.

Richard Cochrane

Deplete Coitus

(order from web site)

Taylor Carrasco (compositions)

Repeat: Temporary Contemporary

(For4ears: CD1032)

Toshimaru Nakamura (no-input mixing board, sampling), Jason Kahn (percussion, sampling)

Two releases which share a lot of common ground while producing some really rather distinctive results. Although Carrasco seems to be coming from the ambient-industrial-techno end of things, whereas Toshimaru and Kahn are free improvisors, both end up making grungy, murky electronica which uses repetition without being bound to it.

The Deplete Coitus release is a twenty-minute EP with a basically synth-driven texture. The pieces evolve loops, or at least seem to; in fact, each repetitive unit tends to mutate in odd ways, or to rotate a few times only to be swamped by an analogue fog. The first track is especially tricky in this respect, constantly disappointing your expectations by exceeding them with every imaginative twist. It's reminiscent of some of the more ambient Techno Animal tracks, something you can tap your foot to but which is constantly catching you out.

Carrasco's world is heavily populated by squelches, clanks and bands of static, but there's room for humour, too. A very amusing -- and rather poignant -- faux cameo from Stephen Hawking appears on "Andantino loi", only to be followed by a witty re-working of something which sounds like a soundtrack to an early-'80s computer game. This reference -- plus the disturbingly pornographic Japanese anime visuals -- links Deplete Coitus to the electronica tradition from which it seems so distant. Well worth picking up in the absence of a full-length release, which would surely be a success, as these twenty minutes seem to disappear very quickly.

Repeat, as their name suggests, have a much more mechanical feel -- oddly, because of course they have an acoustic component which Carrasco avoids. Their sound is repetitive in that motorik manner which sounds, initially, like objects bumping along on a conveyor belt until one's ear becomes accustomed to it (one thing which helps is playing it very loud).

Kahn samples his metals and drums on quite short loops, allowing them to build into big, rhythmic textures, while Toshimaru works with bleeps, sine waves and what sound like electrical, rather than electronic, phenomena. Often their approach is to build things on top of one another so that previous ideas tend to just get quieter in the mix rather than being transformed.

The sensation is rather like walking through a factory, the sounds of some machines fading as you walk away from them and towards others (that tended to be Techno Animal's approach, too, for those who love to make connections). As a result, these pieces can be hypnotic and static, and the fact that their sounds tend not to be terribly abrasive reinforces this effect. Kahn's metal objects, for example, often sound as if they're being coaxed with a soft beater rather than torn in half, as such things sometimes do. The standout track is number 5 (they're untitled), a rather minimal piece relying on a simple, repeated figure in a storm of electrical glitching.

Two very different CDs, then, with some odd similarities. Deplete Coitus works in a very linear fashion; what Temporary Contemporary generally let you hear is the construction of the end result, a great multi-layered monster of a sound slowly built up section by section. The latter technique is rather crude and over-used, but it's effective here just because of the lapidary quality of the music. Electronics are always going to have to confront the issue of repetition, which is so deeply entrenched in the tradition of electronic music; these are two discs which find interesting but very different solutions to the problem.

Richard Cochrane

Ueli Derendinger: San Ya

([Percaso Productions](#) : 14)

Ueli Derendinger (shakuhachi)

Not an experimental music disc, this, but a rather traditional one. Derendinger treats us to a sequence of Japanese compositions in the Meian-ryu; indeed, it gives us nearly one-third of the pieces which exist in this style. The sound of the shakuhachi -- an end-blown bamboo flute -- is, however, surprisingly resonant for Western listeners more used to hearing these kinds of sounds in an experimental music context.

Derendinger does give us his own addition to the shinkyoku, the repertoire of new compositions, and it's there where we should probably start because it's here that his love of the sound of the shakuhachi comes to the fore. Along with the standard intervallic structures and free rhythm which characterise shakuhachi music, he appears to have added quite extreme timbral effects as compositional elements. The flexibility in pitch which the instrument offers are exploited to the full in the bubbling opening. It seems that a piece in shinkyoku gives Derendinger a liberty to create more textural effects than the could be applied to honyoku pieces without overstepping the margins of allowable interpretation.

Still, traditional shakuhachi music, perhaps only equalled in this by some vocal styles, has always had a lot in common with the Western avant garde, even centuries before such a thing existed. The focus on open rhythmic structure means that sounds can stand alone and are subject to scrutiny. The upshot of this is that timbral variations are as essential in shakuhachi music as pitch variations in a raga or the blues -- without them, you simply wouldn't be playing the music at all.

Derendinger has obviously entered into this spirit wholeheartedly. His control over the flutter-tonguing, overblowing and microtonal techniques which give the instrument its astonishing musical depth (this is essentially a tube with five holes in it) is virtuosic. Whether the subtleties of his performances are well-judged or not will have to be left to experts, of which this writer is certainly not one, but these interpretations sit comfortably with those by established Japanese performers.

Those with an ear for Western experimental music -- especially new music and free improvisation -- will find a lot to enjoy in shakuhachi music, probably more so than most other Japanese traditions even, and this disc contains some wonderful examples. For its focus on the Meian-ryu it is to be particularly praised, since it gives a clear picture of what this style is about for a Western audience too often palmed off with "world music" discs which give us little help in understanding the sounds we hear. And unlike many such offerings, this session has been beautifully recorded.

Richard Cochrane

Denmark's Intuitive Music Conference 1997

([Av-Art](#): DIMC001)

Claus Bech-Nielsen (Accordion), Carl Bergstøm-Nielsen (French horn, voice), Frank Heisler (percussion), Helene Jerg (cello), René Morgenseen (saxophones), Nisima Marie Munk-Madsen (flute), Gerhard Pischinger (flute), Henrik Rasmussen (penny whistle), Robert Cole Rizzi (guitar), Johan Toft (marimba), Ivan Vinzce (viola), Kumi Wakoo (swanee whistle, voice)

Three tracks: "First Tutti Improvisation", "Second Tutti Improvisation" and, between them, "Pause". "Pause": oh dear, you think, looking at the timings. Nearly four minutes; of what? Silence? What's the point? Is it some kind of Cagean joke? Well yes, it is, actually, but not the one you were expecting.

This disk documents the music made at the opening of DIMC '97 by a dozen delegates, most of whom had never played together before. Assuming there was no conductor (none is credited) and no pre-arranged sequence of events, the result is pretty astonishing.

Twelve strangers improvising together is a recipe for disaster; what usually happens is this. The music begins tentatively, unstructured, with no-one wishing to tread on toes. Slowly, pressure builds up as egos are forced to submit to the rather boring music which is going nowhere. Something gives, someone plays up and then it's open season. Eventually everyone is exhausted from trying to play louder than everyone else and the sound peters out.

The DIMC delegate have avoided this chain of events so completely that one might suspect they're really a regular band and the whole thing is a hoax. The music is spacious, layered and sophisticated. The dominance of non-reed woodwing (flutes and whistles) creates a nice effect in the first piece because, instead of competing, the musicians play as a section. Their shifting bed of sounds, often augmented by some of the other instruments, forms a perfect foil to the percussive and very responsive work elsewhere in the group. Special mention here must go to Rizzi, who plays what in this group constitutes a solo -- a few seconds of slightly more prominent music, always interacting with the group and not a noodle in sight. A lovely contribution.

Then comes that pause. In fact, this is literally the unedited gap between the two pieces. Members of the group chat, laugh, check their tuning, make unidentifiable noises. The joke is that the group end up making a very rarefied, ambient sort of music in this gap, a music which the curators of the CD have chosen not to delete. Nothing like as focussed as the "real" improvisations, this is a diffuse, rather charming slice of life and it was the right choice to leave it in.

Also, the second piece grows quite naturally out of this candid sketching and scuffling; although it has a distinct start, the music makes more sense for hearing what came immediately before. The second performance is much more restless and much longer (over half an hour), but the group manage to sustain it. It feels as if each player has decided that instead of trying to hold the spotlight on themselves, as musicians are wont to do in such situations, they thought it would be much more interesting to keep it moving. Whenever the focus falls on one player, they do something with it and pass it on. It makes the piece a more abrasive experience, but it's an exhilarating one too. Highly recommended.

Richard Cochrane

Denmark's Intuitive Music Conference 1998

([Mesostics](#) : MESCD0006)

Carl Bergstom-Nielsen (french horn, voice, penny whistle, percussion), Henrik Ehland Rasmussen (recorder, percussion, kalimba, voice), Frank Hiesler (percussion), Helene Jerg (cello, voice), Johan Toft (marimba), Ivan Vincze (viola), Kumi Wakao (violin, voice)

[Last year's DIMC disc](#) (recorded in 1997) contained one of the most convincing examples of extended, large-group improvisation of the year. Although it sounds very different, this year's proves likely to do the same for 1999. They've pushed things even harder this time, going for a single piece nearly an hour in length featuring some, but not all, of the same musicians.

Rather unusually, the location of this recording is of prime importance. They've taken the group out of the concert hall and into an open-air space situated underneath the concave roof of an enormous water tank which amplifies the music and adds a series of at least six discrete echoes to more percussive sounds. The result lends itself well to the drifting, ambient textures which open the disc and which are never far away throughout the performance.

The absence of horns means this group can work together to create close, anonymous clouds of sound. The recorder, which in Rasmussen's hands sounds like a shakuhachi, gives a Japanese sound to the opening minutes, and the piece as a whole has that contemplative attention to timbral detail so important to that music. Solos do come and go -- Rasmussen's at the start, Toft's a third or so of the way in -- but the overall impression is of a collective whose interest is in making the music as a whole work well. When solos arrive, they are often understated, and Toft's is exemplary for the space it gives to his collaborators while still retaining its own musical interest.

Sometimes the long echo can feel a bit overwhelming, but the players use it well. Long notes are enriched by the out-of-phase effect of the reverberation, making the group sound bigger than it really is; percussive sections bounce out of control and don't last so long as is usual in these kinds of workouts. If it sometimes has the whacked-out feel of very early Sun Ra, it far more often has an ambient texture with long notes forming its backbone. All of the instruments, including the voices, typically hold their notes for fairly long periods, giving this piece a decidedly largo feel to it. The percussion itself is suitably muted and, except for a more soloistic section near the end of the performance, is used for accentuation rather than the provision of a rhythm track. There is, if you like, a final rhythmic section; the applause, which the natural echo samples and loops into an irregular ebb and flow.

The string players are unafraid of playing consonant, open-fifth chords and allowing their drones to slowly mutate underneath, or on top of, more active movement from Hiesler, Toft or the voices. This is no minimalist session, but it's patient and thoughtful enough not to hurry things, and the result is beautiful and listenable without giving up its avant garde credentials. An object lesson in how to do this sort of thing, this disc should be required listening for all would-be improvisors.

Richard Cochrane

Ernesto Diaz-Infante and Chris Forsyth: Left & Right

([Bottom Feeder/Pax](#): BF04/PR90227)

Ernesto Diaz-Infante (guitar), Chris Forsyth (guitar).

Ernesto Diaz-Infante: Ucross Journal

([Pax](#): BF04/Pr90249)

Two wildly different recordings from Diaz-Infante, and not just separated by their instrumentation. "Left & Right" is a series of duets constructed by a trading of tapes between Diaz-Infante and Forsyth, the latter laying down complementary tracks on top of the former's improvisations; "Ucross Journal" is a series of solo piano compositions created during Diaz-Infante's residency at something called the Ucross Foundation in Wyoming.

The music on "Left & Right" falls into the same genre as that played by Caspar Brotzmann or Thurston Moore. It is, in other words, a continuation of the tradition spanning Hendrix and Sharrock, a tradition of "blizzards of noise", textural walls of sound which are far removed from other guitar traditions. This kind of thing can be great or awful, depending on how good the musicians are at playing a patient game with one another, and that in turn depends largely on whether this style of playing is what they really do or whether they're secretly dying to break out into a screaming solo.

The music, on this occasion, is splendid. Forsyth and Diaz-Infante clearly understand one another and have that sensitivity which such loud, abrasive music requires. Instead of competing over volume, technical wizardry or prominence, they co-operate. The fact that their performances were separated not only in time but also by a whole continent may have had a lot to do with facilitating this relatively ego-less manifestation of a usually horribly egocentric instrumental combination. What's also nice is that, title notwithstanding, the two tracks are combined together rather than being panned hard left and right as these things sometimes are. The upshot is that the identity of the performers matters less than the success of the whole.

"Left & Right" is at times a ferociously loud and dissonant record; its companion release, "Ucross Journal", could hardly be more different. The pieces here have an open tonality which is perhaps intended to conjure up the wide, flat landscapes which feature so prominently in the titles; all are short, with none of the thirty tracks reaching three minutes.

Week One consists of six pieces made up of chords which seem as self-sufficient as stones, coming one after another at slow, processional rhythms. These remain a feature of the works which follow, all of them as Feldmanesque as the track to which Diaz-Infante applies this term: simple, gestural rhythms sit atop them, or they get broken up rhythmically to create arpeggios or bass lines. Occasionally things get a little more dissonant, but always with that sense of notes hanging calmly in the air. Never does effort seem to enter into this music.

"Left & Right" is for all those who enjoy inventive sonic experimentation by guitarists; textural to the point of sounding almost electronic at times, it's a very fine piece of work indeed. Sitting listening to "Ucross Journal", on the other hand, can give the impression of the pianist having nodded off at the keyboard. That blissed-out snooziness makes very attractive background music, which is perhaps exactly what music inspired so strongly by landscape ought to be. "Left & Right" is unconditionally recommended; if you enjoy post-minimalism of the Feldman school, then "Ucross Journal" will probably float your boat too.

Richard Cochrane

Misere et Cordes: Au Ni Kita

([Potlatch](#): P101)

Pascal Battus, Emmanuel Petit, Dominique Repecaud, Camel Zekri (guitars)

Diaz-Infante and Forsyth: Wires and Wooden Boxes

([Pax](#): EE03/PR90252)

Ernesto Diaz-Infante, Chris Forsyth (guitar, piano, little instruments)

Manuel Mota: For Your Protection Why Don't You Just Paint Yourself Real Good Like An Indian

([Headlights](#): H04)

Manuel Mota (guitar), Margarida Garcia (bass)

If among the instruments of free improvisation the saxophone is still the king, the guitar is surely its impatient prince. It's an instrument which lends itself to preparation, modification, manipulation and other sorts of abuse; it attracts disaffected rockers, folk musicians and punks like the sax draws jazzers. As a result, guitar-driven projects like those represented on these three disks are often quite different in flavour from reed-based ones.

Misere et Cordes (not the best band name of all time, but no matter) are a quartet which aims to encompass the whole range of the instrument: classical, acoustic, electric and "surrounded". One assumes (and this is only an assumption) that the latter is either heavily modified or played flat on a tabletop with a variety of instruments; either way, the sounds this conjures up are the sounds of the album as a whole.

These are guitars as sound-sources and, although there is (as there always is) some conventional technique lurking under the surface, there are few notes or chords and certainly none which function as such. Zekri adds some rudimentary electronics into the mix, but otherwise the sound is dominated by the now-familiar clicks, bangs, clanks, scrapes, squeaks and rattles of this vocabulary.

The pieces, as you might expect, are pretty formless. There are good bits -- the second half of "Argyl", for example, pits the guitarists very sparsely against either Zekri's electronics or Repecaud's electric guitar -- but there are also those inevitable bits which have you wondering where they're going. Fans of this percussive, tactile style of guitar-playing will find things to enjoy here, although it probably won't win any converts. This writer would have preferred a more textured approach, with more disciplined deployments of light and shade. Lovers of the noisier, less organised end of improv will like it better, and there are undoubted high points.

Diaz-Infante and Forsyth's album inhabits a similar sound-world, and a very different one from their [impressive first disk](#), which was as dense with sound as a Caspar Brotzmann set. These, on the other hand, are free improvisations in the most stagey sense, explorations of the sonic possibilities offered up by a studio containing not only their guitars but also a piano, a piano soundboard and a variety of other objects.

Although stylistic differences between this duo and Misere et Cordes are slight, the duo format immediately makes the music less dense and more inviting, exposing details which the sheer layeredness of the quartet all too often obscures.

Most of the disk is taken up with duets between Diaz-Infante's acoustic guitar and Forsyth's electric. As might be imagined, the disparity between the two instruments invites comparisons with the rich pageant of guitar timbres offered by Misere et Cordes, but in fact the two are closer in sound than that suggests; indeed, it's often difficult to separate them despite the fact that they play quite distinct instruments. The tendency to explore textures at length which the quartet eschews is exploited to the full here, and although this makes the music relatively less full of incident, it does render it more approachable.

There are also three tracks featuring other instruments, but again, because of the extremely non-standard approaches taken to them, they tend to blend in with everything else. There's none of the subtleties of Diaz-Infante's piano compositions here; it's all percussion, at some times furiously active, at others so quiet as to force you to strain to hear. These contrasts help give the music large-scale shape, but the details are as impenetrable as those presented by the quartet discussed above; like theirs, this is thorny music which bristles with energy even at its quietest.

Forsyth is not the most technically interesting guitarist to listen to; he often sounds scribbly and gestural, as if

making big movements to get his sound. Still, though, what he plays is interesting, and sometimes (the opening of "Pulled Wires", for example) he finds interesting conventional notes and shapes in his determinedly primitive technique. One can wish for more of them, but that misses his point, it seems. Diaz-Infante remains an interesting and rather enigmatic multi-instrumentalist, and improvising isn't the only thing he does or even, necessarily, the thing he's best at. Still, the pair turn in a focussed set here.

Manuel Mota is the most conventional of the players represented here, in the sense that he's interested in melodic lines within a free jazz framework. He sounds as if he's playing over-amplified and trying to be quiet, which is an interesting approach that can lead him into nice choices of articulation (it's much easier to talk about this kind of music, you see; the frames of reference are readily available, whereas for the other disks discussed here they're ambiguous, still half-formed and entirely controversial).

Here as on his previous CD he's working with excellent electric bassist Garcia. They share an aesthetic founded in conventional notes-playing but acutely aware of timbre. Her work is subtle, even secretive, but it makes a big impact, and helps sustain Mota's soloistic approach.

That's not to say that this is fiddly, note-heavy jazz guitar; Mota is infinitely closer to Sonny Sharrock than Frank Gambale. Above all of the guitarists he's most like, he's most like Joe Morris, but he has a much more risky tone which makes him much less impersonal than Morris can be. This is often quiet, understated free improvisation which retains links with jazz; Mota and Garcia as a duo certainly deserve wider recognition.

Richard Cochrane

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The music on "Left & Right" falls into the same genre as that played by Caspar Brotzmann or Thurston Moore. It is, in other words, a continuation of the tradition spanning Hendrix and Sharrock, a tradition of "blizzards of noise", textural walls of sound which are far removed from other guitar traditions. This kind of thing can be great or awful, depending on how good the musicians are at playing a patient game with one another, and that in turn depends largely on whether this style of playing is what they really do or whether they're secretly dying to break out into a screaming solo.

The music, on this occasion, is splendid. Forsyth and Diaz-Infante clearly understand one another and have that sensitivity which such loud, abrasive music requires. Instead of competing over volume, technical wizardry or prominence, they co-operate. The fact that their performances were separated not only in time but also by a whole continent may have had a lot to do with facilitating this relatively ego-less manifestation of a usually horribly egocentric instrumental combination. What's also nice is that, title notwithstanding, the two tracks are combined together rather than being panned hard left and right as these things sometimes are. The upshot is that the identity of the performers matters less than the success of the whole.

"Left & Right" is at times a ferociously loud and dissonant record; its companion release, "Ucross Journal", could hardly be more different. The pieces here have an open tonality which is perhaps intended to conjure up the wide, flat landscapes which feature so prominently in the titles; all are short, with none of the thirty tracks reaching three minutes.

Week One consists of six pieces made up of chords which seem as self-sufficient as stones, coming one after another at slow, processional rhythms. These remain a feature of the works which follow, all of them as Feldmanesque as the track to which Diaz-Infante applies this term: simple, gestural rhythms sit atop them, or they get broken up rhythmically to create arpeggios or bass lines. Occasionally things get a little more dissonant, but always with that sense of notes hanging calmly in the air. Never does effort seem to enter into this music.

"Left & Right" is for all those who enjoy inventive sonic experimentation by guitarists; textural to the point of sounding almost electronic at times, it's a very fine piece of work indeed. Sitting listening to "Ucross Journal", on the other hand, can give the impression of the pianist having nodded off at the keyboard. That blissed-out snooziness makes very attractive background music, which is perhaps exactly what music inspired so strongly by landscape ought to be. "Left & Right" is unconditionally recommended; if you enjoy post-minimalism of the Feldman school, then "Ucross Journal" will probably float your boat too.

Richard Cochrane

Kenne/Brennan: Pipelines

([Leo Records](#): CDLR292)

Hans Kennel (trumpet, alphorn), John Wolf Brennan (pipe organ), Marc Unternahrer (tuba)

Diaz-Infante, Ernesto: Solus

(Pax Recordings: PR90250)

Ernesto Diaz-Infante (piano)

Ernesto Diaz-Infante is a pianist and guitarist of remarkably catholic tastes. Last year he released a fearsomely noisy electric guitar record and a quiet, Feldman-inspired set of piano pieces. Here he's back with the piano, but the mood is much more restless and the overall feel far more technically assured.

Superficially, there's a common note here with Howard Riley, in that this music has a rolling rhythm which is driven by distorted, elasticated boogie-woogie bass lines topped by zingy dissonances. But the difference is that this isn't really very jazzy music; it sounds far more indebted to classicism, and the cool breeze of Diaz-Infante's previous disk blows through this session, too. There may be many ragtime strategies in this music, but they're borrowed and translated just like Tatum translated classical music into jazz.

Harmonically there are some very clever things going on here -- Diaz-Infante has either a cunning ear or some kind of theoretical thing going on, as many of these pieces make perfect sense in terms of functional harmony, another oddly classical concept which is a million miles away from the free jazz this resembles on the surface. Just one complaint: there are thirteen tracks here, all of moderate length, and it would have been nice to hear how these ideas would work over a longer time-scale.

John Wolf Brennan is also a pianist known for his eclecticism, and here he has translated himself onto a church organ for the purposes of playing something somewhere in between baroque music and jazz. Kennel is the perfect partner in such a project; his trumpet is brilliant and bright, sharp and clear, just as it should be for this music of fanfares. Eschewing strong dissonances, this duo instead reach for harmonic nuances and the sound of a big baroque church celebration transported en masse into the twenty-first century.

They're joined by Unternahrer's tuba for just four tracks, and his uneasy parp pushes them into slightly edgier waters. This is music you really have to listen to: it creates an aura of pleasing-enough sound, and that's all you hear if it's on in the background. Only close-up do their cleverly intertwined lines really emerge. What's more, the very weirdness of this project can overpower the music the first time you hear it. But there's real musical intelligence under that it's-better-than-it-sounds exterior.

Brennan and Kennel have managed to take a powerfully classical paradigm and inject, rather gently, some elements of jazz into it, creating an improvised music of some complexity out of an unpromising culture clash. In a quite different way, Ernesto Diaz-Infante is using classical and jazz strategies together to create a cerebral but also rather inviting piano music. Classical-jazz crossovers? Nu-cool? Maybe, but two more different results of such cross-fertilisation would be hard to come by.

Richard Cochrane

Ullman, Gebhard: Ta Lam Zehn

([Leo Records](#): CDLR290)

Hinrich Beermann (sax), Daniel Erdmann (sax), Thomas Klemm (sax), Jurgen Kupke (clarinet), Joachim Litty (reeds), Theo Nabicht (reeds), Heiner Reinhart (bass clarinet), Volker Schlott (reeds), Gebhard Ullmann (reeds), Hans Hassler (accordeon)

Dolmen Orchestra: Sequenze Armoniche

([Leo Records](#): CDLR291)

Pino Melfi (trumpet), Marco Sannini (trumpet), Alfredo Sette (trumpet), France Angiulo (trumbone), Michele Marrano (french horn), Nino Bisceglie (tuba), Paola Cicoella (flute), Nicola Puntillo (clarinets), Vittorio Gallo (sax), Felice Mezzina (sax), Gaetano Partipilo (sax), Pasquale Gadaleta (bass), Antonio Dambrosio (drums), Aldo Bagnoni (percussion), Armanda Desider (percussion), Linda Bsiri (voice, sea trumpet), Michel Godard (tuba, serpent), John Surman (sax), Nicola Pisani (conducting), Vico Miloli (trumpet, one track only), Enrico Del Gaudio (percussion, one track only), Giovannangelo De Gennaro (voice)

Sun Ra: Live at Praxis '84

([Leo Records](#): GY5/6)

Sun Ra (keys), Ronnie Brown (trumpet), Marshall Allen (reeds), Elie Omoe (reeds), John Gilmore (reeds), Danny Ray Thompson (reeds), James Jacson (reeds), Rollo Redford (bass), Matthew Brown (conga), Don Mamford (drums), Salah Ragab (conga) [NB most musicians play numerous instruments]

"Big Band Jazz": not the first phrase which springs to mind when considering the world's avant garde musics of the late twentieth century. And so it has turned out to be, because free jazz has never been a big-money game, and big bands cost big money, so the results don't take much working out. On the slightly more mainstream side of the weird music continuum, however, bandleaders have long enjoyed trying ambitious experiments which, as is in the nature of such things, sometimes work and sometimes don't.

One of those bandleaders, and the most legendary, was Sun Ra. This disk reissues a triple vinyl release now unavailable, and documents what appears to be an entire, two-hour concert by the Arkestra from 1984. At this point, Ra had lost much of his avant garde following and gone some distance on a journey down a road few would follow him on, a rediscovery of some of the kitscher elements of big band jazz in which he had always had a prurient interest. So here we get "Somewhere Over the Rainbow", "Mack the Knife", "Days of Wine and Roses" and "Satin Doll" in amongst the free-fall improvisations and outer-space chants.

Many of those arkestral improvisations are, as most Ra fans will eventually admit, pretty unlistenable, and there's a really baggy example here, but what's pleasing is that there's not too much of that nonsense and that we have plenty of Ra playing in smaller groupings and especially solo, something he was weirdly good at. His cocktail cheesiness intercut with funky blues and atonal splatters must have sounded pretty radical in '84, and even more radical back when he started doing it, but these days every Tom, Dick and Harry does inter-genre collages and the whole thing can sound a little cheap. Yes, these solos do manage to make some musical sense, but in the end there's a tameness here which isn't in his earlier work.

You either like this side of Ra or you don't. Those who do would argue, one supposes, that his cross-fertilisation of Henry Mancini with Cecil Taylor raises profound questions about the history of jazz, which it undoubtedly does, but that's a dubious reason for wanting to own the record. Add to that the fact that this is a not-very-good recording of a band who sound tired and sloppy and it's not a terribly attractive proposition. Ra completists won't find it's the worst thing in their collections by a long chalk, but it's by no means the man at his best, not even for this period.

The Dolmen Orchestra are a jazz band retrieving and altogether different musical tradition into their free jazz base -- that of the Gregorian chant. It sounds grim, like a bunch of people whistfully playing prettied-up Medieval music for the benefit of a middle-brow audience that like to think it's being adventurous. Well, this isn't hardcore avantgardia here, but it's not rubbish either. Indeed, these five compositions, each by a different bandmember, manage to use the Gregorian elements in an almost entirely covert way, enabling their origins slyly to elude the casual listener.

They do get close to easy listening briefly with Nico Marziliano's "Contemplation for a Sacral Sequence", which is pretty horrible unless you like your jazz to sound a bit like a very good overture to a West End musical; the title track has moments like this, too, and it can be a bit upsetting. This, though, isn't the rule, and the track which follows Marziliano's, "Ferma l'Ali" by impressive tubist Michel Godard, comes on like something by Berio with its swooping female voice and controlled but chaotic-sounding band. The high points of this record are truly

marvellous; the low points low only for being inoffensive, lazy, unremarkable. By contrast the opener, "Sequenza", is remarkable, one of those starts to an album which promise more than the following hour can possibly deliver.

Ullmann's big band is an all-reeds one, playing his own compositions which have a tendency to fuse jazz with both '20s Modernism (think Hindemith, Stravinsky and Weill) and various "world" musics, particularly the folk musics of the Middle East. Ullmann has the finest sense of orchestration of anyone represented on the four disks considered here, and by quite some distance; his ability to spread his big, thick harmonies around so that they shimmer into life is extremely impressive.

He's helped by the fact that the band are a fine one, and the soloists make strong, intelligent statements under what are often loud and harmonically complicated conditions. He's also helped by his ability to write good tunes, with enough tricky convolutions to keep the free jazz fans happy. This is positively big band jazz -- not the accretion of small groups which the Arkestra generally breaks down into, nor the pretty much through-composed music of the Dolmen Orchestra but a music which genuinely fuses big tunes and funky arrangements with integral improvisation.

"Ta Lam Zehn" is very impressive stuff, and if you like your jazz sharp and spikey but composed, you'll be hard-pushed to do better than this. Proof that using composition doesn't mean taking the easy route out, the only reservation one might have is that early Modernist connection; this music does sound a bit quaint, and not very contemporary. If that doesn't bother you -- and really, why should it? -- this set of clever, well-constructed and exuberantly-played pieces is a real treasure.

Richard Cochrane

Michel Doneda: Anatomie des Clefs

([Potlatch](#) : P598)

Michel Doneda (soprano sax)

"I must succeed in endowing the parts of my body with relations of speed and slowness that will make it become dog, in an original assemblage proceeding neither by resemblance nor by analogy" -- Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p.258.

It's not often that improvisors make solo discs that sound like this any more; it feels like a manifesto, a vocabulary statement. Yet Doneda is neither a particularly young player nor an inexperienced one; he's been making music like this for nigh on fifteen years. It's gritty, uncompromising stuff, sticking up a bad-tempered two fingers at anyone who dares find it difficult.

His repertoire of techniques is similar to John Butcher's, but his sound is very different. Doneda likes to play in the extremes of his instrument just as Butcher does but, unlike the British player, seems determined to go beyond the point of control. This means that many of his ideas seem only to half come off; very ambitious ideas they may be, but often he's left gasping into a horn which remains stubbornly silent.

Part of this is the wilful ugliness of Doneda's music, its denial of any kind of prettification to the point that only the nastiest available sounds are employed. This is part of the point, because those ugly sounds are sounds which come from Doneda's body -- his breath or the sound of saliva trapped under the reed, or his vocalisations interfering with the vibration of the air column to the point that a kind of semi-controlled noise is the only result.

There is a school of thought in improvised music that an unrehearsed, naive approach to one's instrument is the only true way of improvising with it. But this isn't Doneda's approach. These are very extreme techniques -- often extremely quiet ones, working at the margins of feasible sound-production. The effect on this disc is one of techniques pushed even further than possible, resulting in the almost complete breakdown of coherence. That, one suspects, is Doneda's aim; to go beyond technique and become, like Braxton before him, a kind of animal by technical perversion (in the best, Deleuzian sense of that word, naturally). The title -- anatomy of keys -- indicates Doneda's cybernetic project, a project of organicising his horn, or of turning his own body into a reed instrument.

Yes, these are brave tactics, and yes the spirit of experimentation is very much alive and well on these three long tracks. The problem is that it sounds like the kind of experimentation which goes on in the practice room, not the recording studio. Solo, he has the necessary chutzpah not to cram everything into the first ten minutes, which speaks volumes about the length of his playing experience, but the end result rather hectoring. Which is a shame, because Doneda is obviously an interesting player and would probably be an exciting live act.

Richard Cochrane

Greg Kelley: Trumpet

(Meniscus: MNSCS009)

Greg Kelley (trumpet)

Dorner/Lonberg-Holm/Zerang: Claque

(Meniscus: MNSCS006)

Axel Dorner (trumpet), Fred Lonberg-Holm (cello), Michael Zerang (percussion, tubaphone)

Two releases from extremely talented trumpeters and the extreme edge of their instrument's development, if we can still talk in such terms any more. Yet, skeptically postmodern as we are these days, new voices do emerge, with fresh sounds and innovative techniques, however much we may think such things ceased a certain number of decades ago.

Greg Kelley is a fantastic player, a maker of music which is alarming, frightening, funny and endearing at one and the same time. There's nothing cute or nostalgic in this collection of mainly brief solos, most of which seem to be played on modified trumpets and/or in strange acoustic environments. The very extreme nature of this music -- which rarely sounds anything like trumpet-playing of any sort, avant garde or otherwise -- is its strength, and Kelley does not balk at giving you what feels like a whole new sound-world.

As is often the way with records like this, most of the pieces are dominated by a particular sound or technique which is explored to create the music. The often brutalist effects are heightened by the music's static qualities and the tendency of pieces to end on a cut, as if the tape was simply switched off. Yet the pieces using breath sounds, particularly the unnamed eighth track, and oddly beautiful, and throughout this CD Kelley gives a virtuoso performance of focussed, determined, controlled music-making backed by a very brave, no-compromise aesthetic. Utterly brilliant.

Axel Dorner is also a trumpeter who plays around the edges of his instrument. Although not such an extremist as Kelley, his focus on breath and mouth sounds -- often seeming to view the trumpet more as an amplifier than an instrument in itself -- makes for a demanding and highly creative soundworld.

This trio set is fairly traditional in format, presenting medium-length acoustic improvisations with the cello and drums fitting quite as you might expect into this quite stratified music. Each of the three players is easy to pick out from the others (not such a common thing in music like this) and their interaction is a matter of action at a distance rather than mutual imitation.

This makes for a set of intelligent, stimulating pieces which are pleasing to listen to. Not as challenging as Kelley, perhaps, but certainly more accessible (a word they may not have expected to see in their press, but there it is). Those who enjoy concentrated small-group improv between clever participants would do well to check this out.

Richard Cochrane

Dominic Duval and the Equinox Trio: Equinox (Leo: CDLR267)

Dominic Duval (bass, mallets, piano, cymbal, voice), Tomas Ulrich (cello, voice, whistle), Michael Jefry Stevens (piano, mallets)

Duval and Ulrich are the bottom half of the CT String Quartet, who released two disks on Leo last year to wide critical acclaim. Stevens, too, released with Leo last year as a member of the Fonda/Stevens Group. Now, the CT quartet are influenced by free jazz but what they play is most strongly connected with high Modernist composition; Stevens, on the other hand, is a mainstream jazz player with a penchant for dissonance. It sounds like a centaur: Jazz Man Gets Culture, or, heaven forfend, Classical Boffins Do Jazz. Well might you approach with trepidation.

It's nothing of the sort, of course. That picture misses the fact that Duval and Ulrich have been working in jazz for years, and while Stevens retains his jazz sensibilities here he certainly isn't calling "I've Got Rhythm" from the back. He's capable of finding perfect, sour harmonies to accompany Duval and Ulrich, and has excellent ears. And on the other hand, this disk, on the surface at least, sounds absolutely nothing like jazz. It's connection with Modernism is clear from the start, and also its ties to more mainstream musics.

Stuart Broomer mentions Bartok in his sleeve notes, who seems a perfect person to have influenced Duval. The bassist plays ideas born of angular, post-serialist abstraction but always, always with a heavily Romantic execution. His vibrato is heavy, he employs grace notes and long, languorous glissandi in his mostly slow lines; he sounds for all the world as if he's playing a lost Hindemith sonata. Ulrich, if anything, is even more old-fashioned in his tendency towards what is usually thought of as "emotional" playing, as evidenced in his solo track here; beautiful, but it sounds almost like the opening bars of the Elgar concerto. Although the music could hardly be more different, this disc as a whole can sound like a 1930s recording of Brahms; that histrionic lushness pervading every note. And there's surprisingly few outright noise-based passages here. Duval and Ulrich enjoy playing notes, and Stevens is happy to join them.

What this is a rather long way of saying is that the trio create a music which is somewhere between a rather Romantic kind of Modernism and a very rarefied jazz. This is nothing like the lingua franca of European free improv; it would be absurd to compare it with the Spontaneous Music Ensemble or AMM. Richly decadent and unapologetic in its self-indulgence, this is beautiful music despite being a pretty demanding listen. Stevens, in particular, is a revelation.

Richard Cochrane

Herb Robertson: Music for Long Attention Spans

([Leo](#): CDLR315)

Herb Robertson (trumpet, little instruments), Steve Swell (trombone), Bob Hovey (trombone, percussion, voice), Hans Tammen (guitar), Chris Lough (bass), Tom Sayek (drums)

Dominic Duval: Asylem

([Leo](#): CDLR316)

Dominic Duval (bass, electronics), Herb Robertson (trumpet, little instruments), Bob Hovey (trombone, turntable, voice), Jay Rosen (percussion)

Trumpeter Herb Robertson was a Berklee-trained fusioner for much of the seventies. He discovered free jazz and the classical music of his century only later, but it is, as these things often are, now entered in his biog as his Damascus Road. For all the unpromising things this promises, however, Robertson is a son of Freddie Hubbard and Kenny Wheeler, a mercurial trumpeter with roots in hard bop reaching for the skies of the avant garde.

As such, "Music for Long Attention Spans" contains more composition than most of the free jazz discs mentioned in these pages, although it must still account for less than 1 per cent of the music as heard. The compositions are lumpy and instantly appealing, even catchy, and they're presented in a way reminiscent of the Art Ensemble of Chicago, with a preference for atmosphere and exuberance over tight ensemble playing. This makes them a real pleasure to hear when they emerge, as they do from time to time, from the group interplay with a naturalness which is harder to achieve than it sounds.

Apart from the genuine versatility of his cohorts, Robertson offers considerable variety himself. As well as a virtuoso and uniquely personal trumpet style, he plays shambolic but fun melodica, keening whistles which add a touch of the ethno-forgery of much earlier free jazz projects and toys as well as ranting extraordinarily through a poem on the opening track, a funny and musically effective performance in itself. His style is not very showy, especially in this brass-heavy setting, but when he gets solo space his charms are undeniable. What's more, when he's working with the group he's proactive, even interventionist, which is something quite rare in American jazz, where horn-ing in on another player's solo is so often grounds for hissy-fits in the dressing room.

The triple-brass frontline here is dynamic and at times challenging for all concerned, but all three keep their heads straight and interact with clarity. As for the rhythm section, Tammen's extraordinary electric guitar is a loose cannon firing acid-coated missiles all over the deck, while Lough and Sayek pump out a relentless, but extremely varied, tidal pulse. This is a jazz band of splendid talents, and this record must be one of the most exciting in the Leo catalogue of those which fall firmly under that generic rubric. Full of unexpected moments, it is genuinely enthralling.

The album with Duval is a very different affair. Despite titles like "The Nightmare" and (oh dear) "Rectal Parasites", it's mostly a more relaxed joint, showcasing seven compositions by Bob Hovey (four co-written by Duval). Rosen is his characteristically twitchy but effective self, but Duval's bass is in sexy, slinky mode for much of this set, and the overall feel is rather laid-back in comparison with the above disc.

That's not to say the music is trivial, or even any less serious. Hovey's turntablism may not be particularly effective -- speed it up! slow it down! spin it backwards! -- but his compositions have a stateliness which has all kinds of pleasing resonances in the history of jazz. Robertson and Duval work beautifully together, and the aforementioned "Rectal Parasites" is a great example, with Duval sliding great, deep notes around the fingerboard in between his dramatic gestures while Robertson skywrites high above him. "Shadow 2", meanwhile has a clever hocket arrangement of a bluesy theme which reminded this writer of Henry Threadgill, no faint praise in the composition stakes.

Rosen is a treasure, but his understanding of swing doesn't always gel with Robertson's more traditional version. This isn't an ageist thing; Rosen comes from different traditions, and although he has some jazz in his playing he didn't grow up listening and playing within that genre as intently as the trumpeter did. As a result, things can sometimes do slightly askew, rhythmically speaking, but at other moments the tension really fires both players to stretch in different directions.

This is a more easy-going set for the listener, but it may have been a more challenging one for the players. While the first disc is an unqualified hit, this is trickier to pin down. The emergence of Robertson on this side of the Atlantic is to be welcomed; the first disc listed here is the one to discover him with, but the second is interesting and shouldn't be dismissed.

Dominic Duval with the CT String Quartet: Under the Pyramid

([Leo](#): CDLR279)

Dominic Duval (bass), Tomas Ulrich (cello), Jason Hwang (violin), Ron Lawrence (viola)

Each of the members of the CT Quartet has made a name for himself in his own right in recent years, none less so than leader Duval. With interest in all-strings improvisation increasing (questions were asked on the fine Free Jazz Digest only weeks ago), perhaps the CT's time has come.

The group is named after Cecil Taylor, and his ferocity and sense of multiple layers moving independently is very much at the heart of what they do. Their sound can be extremely acid at times, as string-based improv usually can, but what's surprising about this disc is how relatively relaxed it sounds.

The group here works at creating multiple layers in a slightly more conventional sense than that associated with Mr Taylor. Instead, this group is beginning to sound more and more like, well, like a string quartet, really. "Mi Kuba", for example, begins almost like a lost Bartok quartet, and although things get a little more hairy from there, that traditional division of labour does somewhat prevail.

Far from an accusation of having gone soft, this makes the CT quartet all the more interesting. On this disk, it sounds as if they're really engaging with what it means to be a string quartet, getting their feet rooted into the history of their line-up as well as poking their heads into the future. The music is beautiful -- Hwang, in particular, is on ravishing form -- and can also be breathtakingly violent, but the way in which it's organised, all on the fly, is fascinating stuff.

Richard Cochrane

Dominic Duval and Joe McPhee: The Dream Book

([Cadence](#): CJR1105)

Joe McPhee (alto sax, trumpet), Dominic Duval (bass)

Trio X: Rapture

([Cadence](#): CJR1106)

Joe McPhee (sax), Jay Rosen (drums), Dominic Duval (bass, electronics), Rosi Hertlein (violin, voice)

Dominic Duval's String Ensemble: Live in Concert

([Cadence](#): CJR1097)

Jason Hwang (violin), Tomas Ulrich (cello), Dominic Duval (bass), Joe McPhee (tenor sax, trumpet), Mark Whitecage (reeds)

It's obvious enough just by listening to him that Joe McPhee has a lot of Ornette in his playing. He has a firm, slightly nasal tone on alto which carries his mostly slow-moving melodies beautifully without ever sounding merely derivative. Although his career is three decades old, McPhee never sounds like a man who is going through the motions of a career which has become irrelevant. Instead, he keeps on growing and continues to surprise; the plasticity of his sound is amazing, and his ability to move with absolute precision between blues and complete abstraction rarely fails.

He's been working with Duval -- now a much-heralded young player in that corner of free jazz which doesn't consider neo-conservatism an option -- for years now, and when the saxophonist was invited to stage a series of concerts at the Knit it seems he knew who to call. The duets which comprise "The Dream Book", an overt tribute to Ornette and his principal co-conspirators from the sixties, are relaxed and generous as their dedicatee's music often is, with Duval's bass strolling along under the rolling saxophone, the two zig-zagging happily through a reconstruction of those simple harmolodic ideas seen from the perspective of a third of a century. Without reviving or reverently re-performing anything, the pair manage to get a whiff of the aura of those records and put it in a contemporary setting. And however fond we might be of Coleman's trumpet-playing activities, McPhee is by far the more technically able on the instrument.

The Trio X session is as different as you like. It begins with a brief, stentorian solo from Duval, which moves smoothly into a forty-seven minute marathon. Hertlein, a figure previously unknown to this writer and, it seems, producer Bob Rusch, makes the trio a quartet and contributes pretty much equally with the others in a performance which does just what you'd expect, but not always in the ways you think it will.

Unless under the direction of Cecil Taylor -- and there's certainly a whiff of Taylor here, particularly in Hertlein's Leroy Jenkins-like violin -- improvisations of this length tend to go in waves, with periods of high energy alternating with calmer passages. Well, that's what happens, except that the piece always seems to move at a slow tempo, and the quieter passages are often the more furious ones. Inspired by the "Negro National Hymn" "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing", the louder passages rise to a slow-burning peak rather than simply becoming faster and more dissonant until the musicians can no longer keep up with one another.

Elsewhere, moments like Duval's electronic treatments of Hertlein's voice to create a gentle but rather metallic, keening line may be "quiet bits" but they're a long way from water-treading. There seems to be a genuine attempt here to get away from standard free jazz values: loud + fast = passionate, quiet + slow = sensitive. Playing at this length generally drops straight into that trap -- but not this playing. There's a huge range of different instrumental arrangements within this piece, and one never feels that the musicians are in competition. One very useful point of contact would be Albert Ayler's engagements with marching music, and some of the same preference for steady musical progression rather than frantic spiralling is at the heart of this performance.

It will come as no surprise by now to find that the string ensemble disc -- composed of two Knit gigs, one with McPhee as guest and the other with younger player Mark Whitecage -- is entirely different again. The String Ensemble, like the CT String Quartet which adds Ron Lawrence, is overtly classically-minded, with no particular jazz connections, until one thinks (again) of Taylor's work with the Cecil Taylor Unit (for whom the CT quartet is named) or Ornette's compositions for strings. The group don't use masses of extended techniques so much as multi-layered melodic improvisations in which ideas seem to move at different speeds, in different directions, simultaneously.

As Duval points out, the two guests use rather different strategies when confronted by the dauntingly complex music which this trio can produce (a minor complaint -- sure, it's obvious when listening, but Cadence's habit of withholding basic information like who plays on which tracks is somewhat irritating here). Whitecage dives into the maelstrom as an equal partner, and the music they make together is unified ensemble playing of a high order. This writer has never heard the reedsman in such convincing form as here, and the fact that the lesser-known player has the lion's share of the time on this release is a bonus.

McPhee, on the other hand, takes a very bullish stand and makes himself the soloist and the trio, however robust, his accompanists. the music certainly seems to flow better when Whitecage is in the saxophone chair; the tracks with McPhee are gloriously loud and lary but certainly feel less substantial. His trumpet is far more ensemble-oriented than his tenor, and much better-suited to the setting, but ultimately Whitecage's tracks here are the real revelation. It would be nice to think of Whitecage working with this trio more in the future.

Record labels like doing this sort of thing, releasing three discs featuring the same people in one go. Perhaps it's in the hope that the late nineties will be thought of as Duval's important "Cadence years" by future jazz historians, although it's probably just because the three sessions were all excellent recordings and it's a shame to eke them out. Excellent they certainly are, and it leaves reviewers with the difficult but rather inescapable task of recommending one of them. Assuming that the comments above haven't swung your wallet one way or another, this writer humbly recommends the Trio X session, but you really can't go wrong with any of these.

Richard Cochrane

Gratowski/Graewe/Lovens: Quicksand

(Meniscus: 007)

Frank Gratkowski (reeds), Georg Graewe (piano), Paul Lovens (percussion)

Duval/Heward/McPhee: Undersound

([Leo](#): CDLR295)

Dominic Duval (bass), John Heward (percussion), Joe McPhee (soprano sax)

That George Graewe is an underappreciated genius seems uncontroversial. His off-kilter piano-playing is wonderful wherever you chance to hear it, deeply permeated as it always is with his own, utterly unique and fully-formed musical personality. He most closely resembles Marilyn Crispell, but seems more eccentric, a maverick voice indeed.

It's a great pleasure, then, to hear him in such fine company as this. Lovens is a natural partner for him, another specialist in seasick rhythms, explosions and odd, unexpected lacunae. The kindred spirits for what must be one of the most challenging rhythm sections around for reedsman Frank Gratkowski.

Not that Gratkowski treats this gig much like a conventional free jazz blow. That's just what it is, of course, but the European sensibilities of Graewe and Lovens help make this ensemble music as much as the kind of stratified jazz which forms the deep structure of everything here ("Green Fuse" being its clearest manifestation).

The only niggle with this is that the dynamics are varied indeed, with all four pieces starting hesitantly, lulling the listener into turning up the volume only to be jolted back to the hi fi when things get cooking. In all of this, Graewe seems too quiet and the sound generally a little fuzzy, but maybe that's just how they sounded on the night: it's a live recording (from January 1999) and the lack of studio-quality normalisation is more than made up for by the energy and commitment of these four extended jams.

Undersound is a much louder record, literally and metaphorically. Rather than exploratory feeling-out of the musical space, Duval, Heward and McPhee tend to start their pieces with a bang. McPhee is a stupendous saxophonist, a second-generation New Thing man who growls and squeaks his way through preachin' melodies and clever twists on his bebop heritage. Fitting in somewhere between Shepp and Gayle, it's easy to ignore players like McPhee or brand them as merely "transitional", but he's a superior musician who demands attention on his own merit. Put this record next to almost anything by the far-more-often-lauded David Murray and the facts speak for themselves.

You can't go wrong with Duval on bass, of course, and his muscular lines and great textural work give McPhee something exciting to work with; valuable Duval solos top and tail the disk, too. Drummer Heward, like Duval, seems to have a handle on both jazz and improv forms, although jazz is what's dominant here (even more so than the session discussed above), which is as well for him as his free jazz swings and pulses while he can seem a bit lost in more open, pulseless environments.

It's good to hear people doing this kind of small group free jazz. That's not meant in a patronising way, as if it were surprising to see people "still" doing it. No, it's good because this kind of music still has a great deal of life in it, and when done well it rarely sounds dated. These two releases are very contemporary and are, of course, showcases for some fantastic talents, whom one gets to hear in detail. The second of these disks is especially recommended, but both are excellent.

Richard Cochrane

Poulsen/Nielsen/Moholo: Copenhagen

([Av-Art](#): AACD1010)

Hasse Poulsen (guitar), Peter Friis Nielsen (bass), Louis Moholo (drums)

Sound Kitchen: Pass me the Wine, Please

([Av-Art](#): AACD1011)

Jari Hongisto (trombone, percussion), Hasse Poulsen (guitar), Teppo Hauta-aho (bass)

Protruberance: Treated and Released

([Zerx](#): 019)

Paul Pulaski (guitar), Mark Weaver (tuba), Dave Wayne (drums)

Faaet/Deane: Grand Cross Eclipse

([Zerx](#): 024)

Al Faaet (drums), J A Deane (trombone, electronics, standing waves, bass flute)

Bass player Hauta-aho might be known to readers through his work with [Trio Nueva Finlandia](#), but the music he makes with compatriot Hongisto and Danish guitar wizard Hasse Poulsen is a long way from their cool, limpid free jazz. This has much more in common with more conventional kinds of free improvisation, the sort one can hear almost any night of the week -- if you know where to go -- in London, Berlin or numerous other big European cities. Despite this more generic overall sound, however, there's some real character here which is quite unique.

Of course, a British writer is bound to compare this group with [Iskra](#), the epochal trio of Derek Bailey, Barry Guy and Paul Rutherford. Well, Hongisto does have something of Rutherford about him, but that's where the resemblance ends. Poulsen opts for a rather jazzier approach than Bailey ever would, and although resolutely atonal and often popping and rattling like the old master himself there's a swing and drive here more closely connected with Sonny Sharrock.

The bassist is the star of this record, though, playing with wonderful finesse through the eleven "courses" presented here (somebody has a sweet tooth: desert is twenty-five minutes long and covers the last four tracks). What's particularly pleasing is the way this group is willing to move into areas of rhythmic regularity occasionally, albeit with plenty of complicated polyrhythms resulting from multiple, superimposed tempi. Hauta-aho holds these moments together with enviable grace and clarity; a player who should be better-known internationally.

Poulsen is back in another CD from Av-Art, also released this month, and with another Scandinavian bass player for whom, if there's much justice in the world, an international reputation surely beckons. Nielsen made a cracking record with Peter Brotzmann last year, and his is another jazzy voice in a free improv world. He shares little else with Hauta-aho, however: his instrument is the bass guitar, and his sound crackles with electricity.

We mentioned Iskra earlier, and actually there are more similarities with this disk than the previous one, just because this is a record of great space and clarity, a set of enervated, languorous improvisations presided over by Moholo's rolling sizzle cymbal, Nielsen's pop and rumble, Poulsen's decadent gestures. It's slow Sunday afternoon music, music which mostly ambles about without doing much. That's not a criticism; sometimes over-earnest music gets right up your nose, and you just want to hear people playing what they feel like, when they feel like it. And the results are unquestionably varied, from rollicking (but still rather languid) wiggling-out all the way down to the near-silent explorations which open "Concert Four".

Another example of this rich variety is Poulsen's strange habit of turning into a 1970s white-boy bluesman from time to time, sounding like a particularly deranged Peter Green on "Concert Three", which is quite disorientating but actually pretty interesting and, at times, funny. It makes the connection between Poulsen and blues- and rock-oriented players like Sharrock and even, dare one say it, Hendrix very clear, and certainly doesn't detract from the overall spirit of the disk, which is as laid-back as you like and certainly not hung up on some aesthetic dogma or other. The sound of three guys having fun; sometimes it comes across as a bit of a jam session, but if that sounds appealing it certainly won't disappoint.

Faaet and Deane, by contrast, make loud, highly-focussed music. There's no skittering about here, despite the way it looks on paper -- don't be fooled by this duet of drums and trombone, the electronics are what define this record and form the big block of sound which these pieces tend to be carved from. The sounds are generally of the sort heard in sci-fi films as atmospherics; combinations of roaring wind, dripping water, swooping synthesisers and ghostly drones, but Deane piles them up and forces them to rub against one another, creating

richly-textured sounds which Faaet's percussion can give shape to.

One does get respite from the big sounds, of course -- on "Zeropoint Chamber", for example, Deane proves himself a capable flautist which Faaet lays down a groove with sleigh bells and a frame drum (or some similar things), and the electronics take a more filtered, less domineering role. Even at their loudest and most frenetic, however, like Poulsen/Nielsen/Moholo, these guys sound as if they're in no hurry, as if the whole fifty minutes is the soundtrack to a single establishing shot at the start of a film, a camera tracking slowly across the New Mexico landscape while the credits are still appearing.

And, as with the trio, there's a delicious paradox here when things hot up and the music becomes funky, loud, aggressive -- it somehow never loses that slowness at its heart. This is a record of rare pleasures, perhaps not great or profound or groundbreaking but beautiful and pleasurable, with bits you could (at a push) even dance to. A throbbing, low-slung kind of cool radiates from it; it is hot and cool at the same time, urban and rural, minimal and maximal.

Finally, Protruberance, and another guitar trio whose mission statement is also likely to include phrases like "having a good time" and "getting down". This is different from the other three disks reviewed here, though, inasmuch as there's an element of composition here, and a definite, deliberate positioning within the jazz tradition (according to the sleeve notes they even play standards, although sadly there are none here).

Using tuba instead as your bass instrument is always an interesting choice, and here Weaver really pushes the music into shape with his big, rounded bass lines and energetic improvisations. The pieces are simple, linear affairs, almost all composed by the tubist and consisting of little more than a bass line and a complementary melody on guitar. For his part, guitarist Pulaski has a lovely energy in his playing, although he too tends to lapse into blues cliché, and without the attendant re-contextualisation which comes from Poulsen's much more avant methods. Still, Pulaski is very listenable, and when the tempo cranks up a tests his technique a bit he can be heard to worry at the notes with a rather likable flair for recovering from his clams.

While all this is going on, drummer Wayne kicks the music along at a brisk pace, locked in pretty tight with his partners to produce something very likable indeed, a music which could have been made any time in the last forty years, really, but which sounds fresh enough not to be branded merely retro. It's jazz with blues, prog folk, even surf elements, a kind of bastardised jazz from the folks in cowboy country, east of the West coast, away from the big cities where the fashionable stuff happens. That's something it shares with the other three disks here, the promise of a taste of something from slightly outside the categories and the trends set down by the big cities.

Richard Cochrane

Massimo Falascone: Bordogna -- 15 (Quasi) Solo Improvisations

([Takla](#) : TAKLA1)

Massimo Falascone (saxophones, tugombuto), Leonardo Falascone (objects, one track only)

Falascone plays exactly as you would imagine, given that his stated influences include Heironymous Bosch, Varese, Paul Klee, Monty Python, Donald Duck and Dracula. His is a big, charismatic voice which is hard at first to pin down; one minute blustering, and the next as delicate and controlled as Lacy (another influence in his extravagantly long list). This disc collects seven solo performances, six overdubs and one duet with his five-year-old son Leonardo.

On alto, Falascone has a style which leaves all the corners and lumpy bits intact. His sour tone negotiates a series of angular gestures, often with a querulous awkwardness that belies their underlying elegance. Mixing extended with more conventional techniques, at its core his sound has a melodicism which brings intervallic patterns around again and again within each piece. There, perhaps, is the Klee comparison: think of those almost childish shapes, held together by a rigorous theory of colour.

His baritone growls and wuffles like a hungry hippo, but that same compelling gawkinsness remains. On sopranino -- an instrument one hears increasingly these days, which is no bad thing -- he has the opposite tendency, a more note-based approach with less abstract gestures, less odd angles to stub one's toe against. It's the MC Escher to his baritone's grotesque Bosch, if you will. In any event, it's easy to hear these two strata in any of the solo pieces, distributed differently according to the instrument in his hands. While his alto is perhaps the best example of this style, his sopranino playing is particularly praiseworthy. It has a Braxtonian quick-wittedness which, married to his taste for the dramatic gesture, surprises at regular intervals.

The overdubs are an odd choice for a player like this. They do work, but in a strange sort of way. You see, Falascone decided not to listen back to the other tracks while overdubbing -- in other words, he flew blind, and any appearance of "interaction" between the parts is purely coincidental (or has its roots in a trick of the memory). Being a linear player, Falascone tends to produce two or three independent lines which develop quite separately. Listening to them is something of a perceptual challenge -- again, one might be reminded of Escher -- but not an unpleasant one. The duet with little Leonardo is surprising for the fact that it works just fine. He's not a sophisticated drummer, but I've heard much worse. A nice showcase for an engaging player (I mean Falascone Senior, of course).

Richard Cochrane

Falascone, Monico & Locatelli: Takla Makan

(CMC: 9970-2)

Massimo Falascone (reeds), Giancarlo Locatelli (clarinets), Filippo Monico (drums), Simonetta Artuso (voice), Fabrizio Spera (drums), Barre Phillips (bass)

Not quite what it looks like on paper, this founding recording of what became the Takla collective features Falascone, Locatelli and Monico playing as a trio and also with guests Artuso, Spera and Phillips. Releases featuring [Falascone](#) and [Locatelli](#) have now been released on Takla Records, run by these two with fellow reedsman Fabio Martini. With interest in the new label's output growing, it seems prudent to take a look at this 1997 release which, in a way, started it all off.

This is a free jazz session, make no mistake about it. Falascone has strong jazz credentials, and his broad-shouldered alto lurches with graceful ungainliness through the first number. Fittingly, it's just the three of them for this one, which helps the new listener make sense of what's going on. While Falascone is something of a bruiser, whose intelligent core is dressed up in some big, swaggering gestures, Locatelli is far more gnomish. The contrast between the two is wonderful because they play together, rather than against one another, and at times, despite their very different approaches, they sing together as one voice.

Monico is a very inventive drummer in this kind of situation, seeming to keep a pulse going only in his head and playing just the punctuations, dropping the bombs without any of that ting-ting-a-ting which unschooled or deliberately retro players go in for. No, this is seriously swinging, seriously sophisticated stuff. When a regular pulse does emerge, it's as a cross-rhythm, an unexpected tempo which suddenly resolves itself in some crashing press roll; there's more than a little Art Blakey in Monico's playing, but stripped of Blakey's adherence to bop timing it becomes a barrage of supremely complex accents. It would be like watching someone solve increasingly complex mathematical equations if it weren't so exciting.

At the centre of this disc is programmed a sequence of four tracks featuring this trio with the mighty Barre Phillips. The bass player will need no introduction, and of course the results of such a propitious partnership speak for themselves. They start out without Monico in a lovely three-way melodic exchange, creating contrapuntal lines with an astonishing degree of crosstalk. The first half of "Buran" sees a more free-improv setting for the quartet, and even after the entrance of Monico the swing is muted in favour of a more textural approach, but elsewhere they play with a definite jazz flavour. The lovely "Djinn" even has that spaciousness associated with certain ECM recordings, though of course it has a good bit more bite than most of what's to be found on that label.

The longest tracks here (taking up more than half of the CD) are in the company of drummer Fabrizio Spera. Two drummers and two reed players is a tricky combination to get right, but Spera is credited as playing "drums and amplified objects", which gives some idea of how he fits in. His sound-world is definitely free improv, not free jazz, and that pushes the trio into other directions. Falascone and Locatelli have since proved their mettle in these more "abstract" settings with their own discs, but on the strength of the opening half of this release it might come as a bit of a surprise that they're able to follow Spera so far down this road.

Not that they've abandoned jazz altogether, but it's a far more attenuated style in which Spera's odd noises really come into their own, commenting on and even, at times, directing the action in a most unexpected way. When they take a little drum breakdown in "Lop Nor", it's clear, too, that Spera has some impressive jazz chops, and the pair create a fleetingly exhilarating moment between them; one could listen to just this duet for a good long while. "Cammina Cammina", meanwhile, sporadically adopts a strange, lilting rhythm (5/16 or something; it's not metrical, really, just irregular, odd) and that suits Falascone and Locatelli down to the ground.

The single, five-minute track with vocalist Artuso is, in this context, slightly strange, but it's good that they included it. The trio sound very much themselves, with Artuso adding in her rather classical-sounding glissandi into the mix. It works wonderfully, and just five minutes is rather a tease, but there it is. Better that than to leave it out altogether.

Falascone, Locatelli and Monico are establishing themselves, along with Fabio Martini, as big-hitters on the Italian free jazz scene outside of the gravitational fields of the Sub Ensemble and the Instabile Orchestra. The Takla label, named after this recording, released three indispensable discs this year, and for those who have them, this is where to fill in some history; for those who don't know this stuff, it's not a bad place to start. Spanning two years, it's also both a valuable document and a wonderful listen.

James Fei: Solo Works

([Leo Lab](#): CD059)

James Fei (reeds)

James Fei characterises himself as a composer/performer and, like Braxton, to whom he confesses a debt, his music, though composed, is extremely closely bound up with his performing techniques and his own "voice". These nine pieces all combine improvisation, indeterminacy and notes-on-paper in differing ways, to create a music which is lively, individual and wonderfully thoughtful.

Fei is an autodidact, it would seem, with an approach which is rather personal. For example, his use of circular breathing to produce "isolated sounds in a continuum rather than un-broken melodies" represents an extremely unusual application of a standard technique. It's these kinds of right-brain tactics which make this disk so compelling; the way Fei separates fingering and articulation into discrete, asynchronised layers in one piece, and then later quotes Stravinsky with a bass clarinet harmonic.

As well as the more conceptual pieces, there are compositions like "for alto saxophone (4.98)" which celebrate melody over structure; this piece sounds simultaneously deeply indebted to Evan Parker and about as far as one could get from Parker's poised, often jazzy ruminations. Fei attacks these pieces with gusto, an unfettered enthusiasm which, impressively, doesn't lead him into cheap "expressivism".

This will, inevitably, be of particular interest to reed players. For most of the time, however, Fei keeps his eye on sustaining and developing musical interest beyond the clever ideas which support his compositions. There is an austerity here which works extremely well, from the titles through the static, textural nature of much of this music all the way to the plain, rather lovely black-and-white packaging. That detachment, oddly enough, makes this music more accessible; these are compositions stripped down to a single idea, expressed clearly and simply. Highly recommended.

Richard Cochrane

Henry Kuntz: One One & One

(Hummingbird CD2/3)

Henry Kuntz (reeds), Don Marvel (electronics)

Opeye: Moss 'Comes Silk

(Hummingbird: CD1)

Henry Kuntz, Ben Lindgren, Brian Godchaux, Esten Lindgren, John Kuntz (all various instruments)

James Fei: For Saxophone with Card Reed and Gated Amplification/Camptown Races 1

(Organised Sound Recordings: no number)

James Fei (reeds)

New CD label Hummingbird offers opportunities for non-Californians to discover the unique Henry Kuntz; on the other coast, fellow saxophonist Fei releases a tantalising mini-CD, also on his own label. Listening to musicians' releases on their own labels is often a wonderful way to encounter them, providing direct access to the performer's conception with no intermediation.

Avant-Shamanic Trace Jazz is vaguely reminiscent of the experiments by Archie Shepp and others involving playing along with raucous reed groups like the Master Musicians of Joujouka. The difference is that Opeye find themselves very much in a postmodern frame. Thus, the quest for ethnic and cultural "authenticity" (a snark if ever there was one) is replaced by, well, rampant fusion, appropriation, even fakery.

This is no bad thing, of course, and Opeye make a joyous riot of a record. "Fancy Dancing Jaguar" is a case in point, with the Chinese Musette playing something sounding like a Middle-Eastern Coltrane while the group free-improvises; John Kuntz does wild, scrawling violence to a steel guitar, Esten Lindgren's trombone occasionally making the sound *um-pah*, a moment later laying down a mournful ballad solo. Everything into the melting pot at once: that seems to be the recipe here. Often the results of such a thing are ugly, but here they're a pleasure to listen to. One of those records where you wish you were in the band when they made it.

One One & One is quite a contrast, a double CD featuring Kuntz solo on tenor sax on the first disk, then in duet with Don Marvel on the second. Unfortunately, the latter's grasp of improvising electronics extends little further than sampling and looping the things Kuntz plays. The results aren't terrible, just a little dull. If you wish improvising musicians played everything five times, this is for you.

The solo disk, however, is well worth the admission price on its own. Kuntz reveals himself as a powerful presence on the sax, and how disciplined of him to stick to tenor, in these days of everybody playing ten different horns. Instead of falling back on changes of instrumentation for variety, he has to make music.

This he does with a sound which combines impressively-controlled ultra-high-register squeaks and whistles with the tenor's more conventional voice. One is strongly reminded of Evan Parker's way of playing with John Stevens -- it's logical, timbrally adventurous, often percussive and always full of ideas. Not that Kuntz sounds like Parker, as his voice is too jazzy and American for that. Fantastic stuff.

New Yorker James Fei is another reedsman who likes to play solo, but there the similarities come to an end. Although not academically trained in music, he's attracted to the classical avant garde, and although an improviser his pieces often involve a conceptual compositional element. This self-released CD-R, if it's still available to buy (numbered copies...) offers twelve minutes of truly intriguing music from a relentless experimenter. The main piece inserts a cardboard reed into the sax and amplifies it, resulting in a ten-minute evolution from tiny, semi-random clicks into a wall of feedback. Truly inventive stuff, much closer to electroacoustic composition than to jazz or improv. Let's hope Fei records more often.

Richard Cochrane

Feigin/Hiltgren/Smith: They Are We Are

([Leo Lab](#): CD071)

Misha Feigin (guitar), Craig Hultgren (cello), LaDonna Smith (violin)

Tammen/Duval: The Road Bends Here

([Leo Lab](#): CD072)

Hans Tammen (guitar), DOminic Duval (bass)

Eugene Chadbourne: Piramida Cu Povesti

([Leo](#): CDLR304)

Eugene Chadbourne (guitar)

Three albums here of all-strings improvised music, all three of very different flavours and featuring very different guitarists (and all three, as it happens, on the prolific Leo label).

Feigin's playing is strongly rooted in conventional techniques, and has rather a strong link with American folk music; he may play classical guitar and balalaika here, but they're often made to sound like a big, steel-stringed acoustic. He enjoys setting up rhythmic, harmonically vague riffs -- perhaps a memory of early influences like Led Zep, as described in his wonderful sleeve notes -- while the violin and cello work in more spikey, "New Music" territory.

Actually, Smith has a degree of folk in his paying, too, and if the overwhelming effect is of shibboleths like Penderecki, the subtle undercurrents are more melodic; not so much reminiscent of the jangling dance tunes which shimmer underneath Feigin's guitar, but the long, slow ballads of the mountains and the Wild West. Whether Smith was actually influenced by this sort of thing is by the by: the music here certainly seems to partake of it, albeit under the surface, as it often did on Feigin's previous Leo release, one track of which also featured Smith's fiddle.

As is so often the case, however, it's hard to tell the two string players apart here except by extremes of pitch, and since both use non-standard sounds very often the problem is compounded, if problem it is; in fact, it's more of a problem for a reviewer than a listener, who is enveloped in their sound very nicely. A final point: Feigin sings a kind of improv scat, too, and it isn't horrible, which is most unusual.

None of those folk impressions for Hans Tammen, one of the most ferociously talented and inventive guitarists to emerge in the last ten years. His technique is noisy and percussive, is energy relentless and unstoppable. Since his recent releases have focussed on electric guitar, where his ability to wring hitherto unimagined sounds from the instrument is truly dazzling, it's nice to hear him here exclusively on acoustic.

His duo partner Duval's most high-profile gig to date has, arguably, been with Cecil Taylor, and there is certainly a strong connection between the pianist and Tammen. Both play with a headlong energy which seems impossible to sustain, which seems bound to be exhausted after only a moment, but which somehow spirals on until you forget it's a whirling, high-speed rush and find yourself at the eye of the storm. There is no doubt that Tammen's music is powerfully energetic, but it seems also to breathe in very long phrases, much as Taylors does.

To keep up with this sort of thing requires considerable skill. There's little point trying to match it note-for-note; only cacophony is likely to ensue. Fortunately, Duval has a wealth of tricks up his sleeve, and he has the strength to lead as well as follow, making for a duo performance of exhilarating dynamism, and a set of eleven tracks each of which has a clear and distinctive identity. Don't miss this one, especially if Tammen's work is new to you.

The work of Eugene Chadbourne, on the other hand, will be known to many, and it's likely that the ongoing series of releases on Leo will in the future be considered an important period of his output. They are all quite different, but all have similar concerns lurking behind them.

There's no question that Chadbourne is an estimable technician, with a vocabulary spanning rock, jazz and a dazzling variety of folk musics. Here we're treated to unretouched, unadulterated improvisations on the resonator guitar, an instrument forever associated with the country blues.

As you might expect, it's a relaxed affair, with nobody in a hurry and nobody getting into a lather about production values; in common with most of his other recent projects, it sounds like a bedroom 4-track recording and it quite possibly is. In such intimate (or faux-intimate) surroundings, Chadbourne gives us his avant side, mixing scratches and hollow knocks with great sliding slurries of notes related to, but in no way resembling, the blues and folk which sit under the surface of everything he does, even the most way-out things like this one.

Misha Feigin: Both Kinds of Music

([Leo Lab](#): CD060)

Misha Feigin (balalaika, classical guitar), in duet with Elliot Sharp (dobro), Davey Williams (electric guitar), LaDonna Smith (violin, dancing on a woden box), Craig Hultgren (cello), Eugene Chadbourne (banjo, guitar)

The Bubbados: We're Really Making Music Now

([Zerx](#): 014)

Mark Weaver (tuba), Stefan Dill (guitar, trumpet), Bubba D (lap steel, bass flute, piano, drums), Mark Weber (covals, guitar, violin, harmonica), Ken Keppeler (violin, mandolin, banjo, accordion, harmonica)

"Both kinds of music" refers, of course, to "Country" and "Western". Rediscovering country music has been something the avant garde has enjoyed doing in a tongue-in-cheek, knowingly urban way for decades, but more recently something less deliberately parodic has been going on between the two seemingly incommensurable genres. The Bubbados certainly play some species of white American folk music, but it's hardly Nashville, and Misha Feigin is a free improvising Russian Balalaika player; it's not even clear which kinds of music are being played, exactly, any more.

The Bubbados call what they do "honkey tonk music", but don't expect ragtime here. This isn't the music of the honkey tonk brothels of the deep south, or even music of the city at all, but deliberately rural, "pure American" redneck music which intends to make you squeal like a piglet. "It's 'bad' awful", explains Weber in his helpful sleeve notes, "Seriously, if you've got a jones for correctness, such as metrical rhythms, proper intonation, western ideas about harmony, then this band is definitely not for you".

Well, that might be going a bit far. These boys know the chords to old songs like "Oh Bury Me Not On The Trail", and not-so-old ones like "Fading Into The Sunset", they do indeed mostly have nice 4/4 metrical rhythms and Weber's voice is pure moonshine. What they do manage to do is create something very special within those parameters.

Their songs seem to struggle with a wall of reverberating, slightly dissonant violins and feedbacked wierdness, and the recognisable world of blues and cowboy songs is delicately balanced against the band's tendency towards strange textures and noisy outbursts. Far from a what-will-they-do-next experience, however, listening to this disc has a satisfying gestalt quality which is not at all easy to achieve.

Don't believe a word of their appeals to "front porch style" music, and certainly not "the blood songs of the American working class" (thirteen of the twenty tracks are original compositions). This is a highly electrified, very contemporary band creating an image of America which is extremely sophisticated but which isn't to be taken for the real thing, which it rather self-evidently isn't, and which is all the better for it. One of the most puzzling and fascinating of recent releases, this is also very enjoyable, and can even be played at parties (the sedate sort where you can get away with Tom Waits, I mean).

This writer has remarked before that folk musics seem to be making something of a comeback in free improvisation and free jazz, particularly the latter. Well, Misha Feigin's album is free improv, but that touch of country and western is there in the title and it's there in much of the music, too. The disc is composed of seven duets -- one with each of the guests except Sharp and Williams, who get two each. That's an excellent format for us to get to know Feigin, and it gives some variety to a style -- all-strings acoustic improv -- which can be a little taxing to say the least.

The country feel isn't everywhere here, but it's certainly there on the tracks featuring Sharp and Chadbourne. Sharp's country affiliations have been well-documented, and married to his love of the blues and his virtuosic but completely unconventional approach the results are wonderfully compelling. Feigin is a little lost in the first piece here, where Sharp plays loud and fast for much of its twelve minutes, but he's there, always adding something constructive and intelligent.

The second track they do, "Zohar Cafe Blues", shows Feigin to be an imaginative chord-player with an unusual preference for sticking with an idea and developing it, although again, and as throughout this disc, the balance is very unfavourable to Feigin and this listener felt the need to adjust it (this is easy to do, as the duettists are panned hard left and right). The long jam with Chadbourne has an almost rocky intensity, packed full of riffs, strange ideas shooting off in different directions and Feigin making odd noises through, at times, a distortion pedal.

British guitar strangler Davey Williams is on top form for this session. Never the most technically complicated of

players, he unleashes a very creditable version of his free jazz blues on "Balalaikofrenia", and does something downright peculiar on "BBQ-Powered Mission To Outer Space". Feigin's classical guitar on this track is particularly good, with the furious unstoppable of Derek Bailey but with his own, cleaner tone. Feigin, like Williams, generally seems to prefer notes to timbral manipulations, which is interesting considering the kind of music they both play.

This track is one of the highlights; "String Theory Revisited", which is nearly exactly the same length, is the other. LaDonna Smith was a new name to this writer, but his violin has a very vocal quality which works wonderfully with Feigin's rolling arpeggios and flurries of notes (again on classical guitar). There's just the slightest country lilt to his sound, just enough to remind you of the title of the disc and no more, but there's that singing melodicism which cuts across many different folk styles. Craig Hultgren's track, "Moondance", is another essential cut, this time developing very slowly from the cellist's reserved and sensitive long-note approach. Feigin gets plenty of room to stretch out here, and Hultgren's playing is at times ravishingly beautiful; not a description one often needs in free improv, but there it is.

In short, this is a wonderful disc. Feigin's balalaika does tend to get obscured by his more muscular peers with their larger instruments, but that's easy to remedy on your hi-fi and his classical guitar, at least, comes through loud and clear without any balance-tweaking. The company he's in here is sufficiently distinguished that it can defeat the expectation that this is a showcase for a new talent anyway. In fact, it's a disc of beautiful music, with the first track (featuring Sharp) the only let-down; Feigin seems to have little to say to him, and although both play well enough the music never really catches fire. That can't be said about what happens next, which is constantly inventive for the remaining hour. Highly recommended.

Richard Cochrane

Simon H Fell: Composition No 30

([Bruces Fingers](#) BF27)

Simon H Fell (composition), with a cast of thousands.

Two hours of music, forty-four musicians, one mad genius at its centre. This writer is increasingly starting to believe that Simon H Fell is one of the most important composers alive, and releases like this just make the case more cut-and-dried by the minute (which is approximately the frequency with which Fell seems to release new stuff, "BF27" notwithstanding). There's not going to be room to discuss individual players here for obvious reasons, but suffice it to say that the line-up's impressive, including John Butcher, Orphy Robinson and Mark Sanders alongside Fell regulars like Alan Wilkinson, Rhodri Davies, Paul Hession, Mick Beck, Charles Wharf and Mark Wastell.

It's a suite of pieces, unified by structural elements of Fell's serialist compositions, assembled in the studio from performances of notated sections and from improvisations. The sound-world is generally either free-improv or free jazz, which might sound like an obvious statement but the two styles cross and re-cross with considerable complexity, forming one of the most immediate means of orientation within this massive piece of work. So there are big-band sections influenced by Mingus and, one suspects, AACM arrangers like Muhal Richard Abrams, rubbing up against spaced-out ambient improv and scratchy, angular interplay.

What is unique about Fell's project -- and his genuinely swinging serialist jazz heads are impressive enough, but there's more -- is his co-option of what Zappa called "xenochrony", in which completely distinct performances are united, any apparent interplay between the musicians being purely coincidental. Of course, the listener works on such material, hearing correspondences between the parts which could never have been intended by the musicians. Zappa is rather scathing about this in the sleeve notes to *Sheikh Yerbouti*, but the truth is that the listener often plays as great a part in the creation of musical cohesion as do the performers, not only in xenochronous pieces but in more conventional ones as well. Composition No. 30 makes xenochrony the rule rather than the exception; the result is utterly unexpected, even unexpectable music which nevertheless seems completely logical. Hats off. Get out and buy it.

Richard Cochrane

Charles Wharf & Simon H Fell: Frankenstein

(Bruces Fingers: BF25)

Charles Wharf (reeds, keyboards), Simon H Fell (bass, keyboards)

Completely bonkers. From the very appealing outside of this release, one would take it for an ordinary duet album by two of UK free music's more adventurous players – and how wrong one would be. Only the track titles give away the fact that something quite genuinely demented is going on within.

The disc's 32 tracks (that's right) are formed by collaging together a variety of solo and duet performances which form the basic material and are rarely heard in themselves, producing instead often densely layered virtual jam sessions. A helpful diagram is enclosed (I love these guys: there's a diagram) which, to take a typical example, indicates that the first track is the middle section of a duet improvisation, overlaid with samples from the other sections played ad lib on keyboards. This is itself then sampled and forms part of the next piece, along with a performance of Bach's "Partita No 2" sampled from the third track.

Neither of the two is much of a keyboard player, but this hardly matters when they spend most of their time triggering samples. The album as a whole is structured like an elaborate knot, recursively sampling itself until it is impossible to tell "live" performances from electronic manipulations.

Because of its quick-change format, there are plenty of stand-out moments here, although the one which grabs you on first listen is probably Fell's iconoclastic reading of a jazz standard, "Here's that Rainy Day", on distorted bass guitar, an instrument which he clearly knows his way around. This is a format which suits Wharf, too – he may be hit-and-miss when developing melodic lines over an extended solo, but he creates intelligent textural music, as evidenced on the outstanding second version of "Crammed with Distressing Brain".

This record has a distinct whiff of Zorn about it, in the brevity of each piece, yes, but also in its use of such an unconventional compositional approach. Like Zorn, Fell is one of the most interesting and consistently successful composers working with improvisors today, and doing the composition after the improvisation is finished is a nice twist which works. He's also a formidable bass player, and anything which he releases is always worth a look. This one happens to be exceptionally good.

Richard Cochrane

Fernandez/Irmer: Ebro Delta

(Hybrid: CD18)

Agusti Fernandez (piano), Christoph Irmer (violin)

Violin and piano duets may come as standard in classical music, where the sonata format was king for so long, but in free improvisation it's a surprisingly unusual pairing. Perhaps that's because there are relatively few really good improvising violinists, or because those who play that instrument prefer to avoid the classical associations by playing with drummers or large groups. Whatever the reason, it's good to hear Irmer and Fernandez teaming up here to create something inventive and endlessly fascinating with that august combination.

Irmer, whose discrete presence on this year's [Statements Quintet release](#) on Leo will recommend this disc immediately to those who know, sounds as if the rosin on his bow is an inch thick. He has that biting tone which can so easily, in the wrong hands, turn into something unpleasantly grating. It's all the more surprising, then, that his tone is so inviting. Unafraid of the rasping extended techniques you'd expect in a free improvised setting, he seems to miraculously avoid anything which would set your teeth on edge. This, combined with his straighter playing which proudly refuses to conceal its classical roots, makes his playing flexible and organic, light-fingered and colourful, but always moving in a decisive direction. I compared his work on the earlier Leo disc to Mat Maneri's: in this more exposed setting, his differences from that player could hardly be more pronounced.

Fernandez, too, sounds as if he comes from a classical background. He too is able to use extended techniques, getting inside the piano and attacking the strings and even the wood to create noisy textures, but like Irmer his more extreme playing is embedded in a note-based sensibility drawn from Bartock, Hindemith and Messiaen. This doesn't make for tame or boring music; far from it. There's less tension between the two approaches than the production of a kind of spectrum which either player can occupy differently at different moments.

What this isn't is a part of a tradition which seems to be emerging of Romantic improvisation, music which rediscovers the conventional markers of "emotion" or "expressivity" in less severe traditions without the intention of simply pushing buttons or being more accessible. No, this is quite a cool album, characterised by austere gestures rather than expansive ones. That kind of music, like any kind, is sometimes successful and sometimes not. It's risky, because it bets everything on those gestures, and the interactions between the players, being interesting enough in themselves.

Fortunately, the bet pays off. This is a remarkably successful pairing, not only because Irmer and Fernandez are individually very good players, nor only because together they exchange ideas intelligently without simply mimicking one another, but also because they have the nerve to allow those virtues to speak for themselves. Less confident players might have included compositions, gimmicks, overbearing experimentalism or overstated expressivity, and the outcome would probably have been less favourable. As a concentrated burst of musical intelligence, this disc is absolutely first rate.

Richard Cochrane

Fiedler/Koen/Ware: 110 Bridge St

([CIMP](#): 185)

Joe Fiedler (trombone), Ben Koen (reeds), Ed Ware (drums)

High Desert Duo: Inside the Landscape

([Zerx](#): 026)

Kurt Heyl (trombone, voice, cornet, percussion), Dave Nielsen (drums, reeds, vibes, percussion)

Bonefied: Trombone Revenge

([Zerx](#): 018)

J A Deane (tenor trombone, bass flute, shakuhachi, percussion), Steve Feld (trombones, euphonium, sousaphone, text), Kurt Heyl (tenor trombone, flutes, percussion, voice), Gary Sherman (trombones, "flugelbone", tuba), Jefferson Voorhees (drums, percussion), Mark Weaver (tuba, tenor trombone)

The trombone was there right at the start of jazz -- before the saxophone, certainly -- but we still don't think it's cool. There are few famous jazz bone men, and none of them are household names. Oddly, that's meant that many players in the various free improv "communities" (whatever that means) have been attracted to it. It's a viable, versatile instrument with a real jazz history and great potential for extended techniques but a well-developed, clearly-defined set of conventional ones. Little wonder, then, that it seems to be more widely adopted now than ever.

The players associated with Zerx were bound to be part of this, I suppose, because Zerx has long been interested in the intersection of early twentieth century musics like blues, honkey tonk and folk with the avant garde (they probably don't even call it that). The trombonist could get to the very heart of the gutbucket and was, of course, literally to be found on the tailgate from time to time. Well, prepare to be surprised, then, because while their releases do have some connections with that world, they're not on open display here.

Bonefied are a mainly-trombone and almost-all-brass ensemble playing sometimes humorous, often rather funky improvisations. They must be a blast live, and this loud, brash recording captures much of what's attractive about the trombone. It's also nice to hear instruments like the sousaphone and euphonium cropping up here, instruments created for, and limited mainly to, military marching bands, a tradition strongly drawn on in this music without it ever being overpowering. Fear not: there are no Sousa cover versions here (it might have been fun to include one, but it would have been a bit obvious, too), and the improvisations, while rooted in free jazz, are often sometimes energetic, making for an extremely likable record.

J A Dean's solo disk is as a different a kettle of fish as you can imagine. The electronics, to be fair, are very strong here, with long, evolving drones dominating the music, but this still purports to be a trombone album (there's even a picture of the thing on the cover), albeit one which sounds nothing like trombones. The pulsating soundscapes will be a bit new-agey for many readers' tastes, but it's an interesting CD of well-executed concert improvisations using electronics which are, presumably, controlled in part by trombone. The first track, an expansive half-hour-long panorama, is probably the best of the lot, and reaches an impressive white-out of rock-inspired noise.

The High Desert Duo's is another non-trombone trombone record, really, given that each of the duo members play at least five different things and only one of those things, in one case, is a trombone, played by Bonefied member Heyl. Duos like this can be awfully annoying: nobody, but nobody, is a really good drummer *and* reeds player, for example, and doubling up like this looks suspiciously like an artificial injection of variety designed to mask an indifferent talent.

Heyl is a really imaginative trombonist with plenty of swagger and raconteurship which mostly make up for a slight technical deficit. Nielsen isn't much of a drummer, and it's a shame he feels the need to play the things from time to time. He sounds reasonably confident on bass clarinet and plays some nice stuff on the vibes, though, especially alongside Heyl's unlisted recorder, wooden flute or similar on the effective 12/30/99#2 (they're all titled this way, something to be encouraged).

Heyl has some limited extended techniques under his belt, mainly vocalised sounds and extreme tongued articulations, but his conventional playing is pretty lazy. The ideas are there, and very promisingly so, but he just can't quite nail them when he needs to. That makes this a sometimes frustrating recording, although there are really pleasing moments, too, and the overall approach of risk-taking and searching is impressive, if not always successful. Fortunately, the music is played as seventeen short pieces, so it's easy to find favourite bits.

No technical worries with the CIMP set, which has Fiedler's eloquent trombone partnered by Koen's equally

smooth-talking sax. This is far more conventional free jazz, of course, and it isn't fair to compare their chops directly with the High Desert Duo's -- free improv has never required the straight technique which free jazz does, one of the easiest ways to discriminate between the two styles of playing. Still, though, it has to be said that the feeling that one is in safe hands here is rather reassuring.

Again, the pieces here are concise and to-the point, but in contrast to either of the other CDs reviewed here, this one uses a small degree of composition to create starting-points for each improvisation, just as free jazz groups usually do. Sometimes these fairly simple melodic "hooks" sound a little odd, as if shoved into the music because that's the piece which is being played, only to be dealt with cursorily and abandoned for the real business at hand. Still, there are some good moments: the composed section of the title track, for example, makes fine use of overtones and when Koen comes back for a solo with a clean, clear tonal line the contrast is beautiful, not jarring.

In all, this is a very successful trio set. Neither Fiedler nor Koen is a flashy player, but they have a poise in their playing and an admirable focus to their improvisations; Ware, meanwhile, plays with great verve, although one suspects he might have felt happier if a bass player were present. As it is, he has a lot of work to do; fortunately, he gets on and does it, and fills out the sound rather well. What's most important, though -- and this is something they share very strongly with the High Desert Duo and Bonefied -- is the "feeling of warmth and communal spirit" they refer to in a brief sleeve note. That sense of co-operation and mutuality which pervades improvised music is well demonstrated by any of those releases. It seems that, in the early twenty-first century, the trombone has many voices, probably as many as there are trombonists, so that the paradox within this music -- that it's as individualist as that, and yet as collective as it is, too -- will continue to perplex us for a while yet.

Richard Cochrane

FJQ -- FJQ (RM: RM001)

Ntshuks Bonga (alto sax), Alfredo Genovesi (guitar), Jerry Bird (bass), Robin Musgrove (drums)

FJQ play a wholly modern-sounding take on high-energy free jazz. Eschewing any sort of '60s revivalism, they sound nothing but completely contemporary. Don't be fooled by the conventional-looking lineup: far from being a standard reeds-and-rhythm session, this is something very different and very special indeed.

Musgrave powers the group along with a drum sound derived as much from rock as from jazz; his vocabulary seems to be a genuine fusion of bebop and prog, all precision and crisp articulation. None of the ambiguating muddiness which followers of the likes of Sunny Murray tend to be attracted to here; every gesture is carefully placed, perfectly timed, clearly stated. He plays in close co-operation with Bird, an articulate bassist who, again, has more than just jazz in his repertoire, and together the two produce a souped-up, ametrical funk and sustain a high energy level without falling back on tired old patterns. With these two in the rhythms section, nothing could go wrong, and nothing does.

Genovesi's interaction with them is a revelation -- he's a distinctive and imaginative player, again making frequent references to rock as well as jazz, particularly in his use of effects, with which he at times turns his guitar into a kind of synthesiser. He's a tasteful player, but also a challenging one. Not content to comp chords (this isn't changes-playing anyway), he interjects his own ideas and keeps the musical flow active and alive. Not so far from the mainstream as John Jasnoch or Stefan Jaworzyn, he is perhaps most comparable with Giancarlo Nicolai. While he doesn't have the same depth of jazz affiliation as Nicolai, it's more than made up for by his sense of what goes where. A player to keep an ear out for in the future.

Likewise Ntshuks Bonga, who really is a wonderful player. Utterly immersed in free jazz, he somehow manages to avoid those near-inevitable avatars, Coltrane and Ayler. He's capable of thematic development, but not tied to it, comfortably switching to textural effects or compressed, surprising gestures as the music requires. Bonga doesn't dominate this date the way that the instrumentation might suggest, but he makes an indispensable contribution.

This is a great record for at least two reasons. Individually, each of the players is fantastically good, and each one is rather undervalued. Collectively, they cook up a storm; one gets the feeling that this is the group that each one of its members has wanted to play in all his life. Magical stuff; let's hope there's more where this came from.

Richard Cochrane

Fonda-Stevens Group: Live at the Bunker

([Leo](#): CDLR301)

Joe Fonda (bass), Michael Jefry Stevens (piano), Paul Smoker (trumpet), Harvey Sorgen (drums)

Joe Fonda & Xu Fengxia: Distance

([Leo Lab](#): CD069)

Joe Fonda (bass, voice), Xu Fengxia (guzheng, voice)

Joe Fonda is a powerful, technically facilitous bassist whose presence on the American jazz scene continues to grow. He's ne of those people who speaks of jazz as "the music"; an old-fashioned jazzman, in other words, albeit an unusually catholic one.

Like his sometime employer Anthony Braxton, he's excited about the whole of jazz, and although the music his qaurtet plays on Live At The Bunker can be angular and freewheeling, it's rarely "free jazz" per se. Opening with a sweet, beautifully-handled post-bop ballad worthy of Clifford Brown, the group sets out its stall as a proper jazz band, with proper chord changes and cool, smouldering solos.

This opener is one of three compositions contributed by the pianist -- the other three are Fonda's. Stevens's Don't Go Baby is a funky modal piece strongly reminiscent of Miles, but Haiku has a mysterious, undulating quality which feels rather unique, with Smoker sounding like a rather sultry Freddie Hubbard, then transforming himself for a beautifully tremulous duet with Fonda arco. All three pieces are strong, but they're as different as can be, which seems to be a part of what this group is about.

The bass player's own compositions are more spikey affairs, wih sharp corners all over the place, liberally peppered with free sections but always structured. The opening of "Circle" shows him to be an accomplished soloist, too, with that rare ability to create drama and old the attention on an instrument which seems sometimes insufficiently declamatory for such a purpose.

The band throughout prove themselves to be unspeakably swinging. Smoker on the aforementioned "Circle" almost catches fire, but elsewhere he smooches up to the mike and plays fine ballad solos. Stevens really does seem to have whole swathes of the jazz tradition under his fingers (apparently he cites Evans and Taylor as influences, as if rather self-consciously making a poitn, but it's a valid point anyway). Sorgen is a swinger, but his free playing is capable and supportive, finding sensible and proactive things to do in an environment in which most straightish jazz drummers often flounder.

Fonda, throughout, is a monster, as he is on Distance; and a more different record you culd hardly hope to ask for. Quite what kind of music this duo plays is something of a mystery, but it's infectious, exciting and barrels of fun.

The guzheng sounds like some kind of silk-stringed koto, perhaps tuned down a little because the strings sound loose and floppy, and are open to being bent up some considerable distance by means of pressure on the opposite side of the bridge. Xu plays it with rhythmic fervous, making it shudder and shimmer with a kind of elasticated bounce. Fonda leaps into the fray, pushing the pulse home where there is one, revelling in the freedom when there isn't.

Xu has a melodic side, too, as evidenced in the opeing of A Journey Into The Desert, in which her notes seem to curl up off the soundboard, twist in the air for a moment and then expire. The results can be breathtakingly gorgeous, but there's always a sense of mischievous fun in this music which never quite lets it get too serious. Highly recommended.

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Richard Cochrane

Jean-Marc Foussat: Nouvelles

([Potlatch](#): P301)

Jean-Marc Foussat (compositions, tapes, keyboards, voice etc), F Pastorelli (voice), P Bouscaillou (bass), M Bohy (percussion), J Berrocal (trumpet), J-F Pauvros (guitar), R Turner (voice)

This is a weird one; a series of pieces created over a period of twenty-five or so years ranging from multi-tracked piano duets to electronic composition, all realised almost exclusively by the named composer. The range of sounds here is staggering, and the pieces, which fall broadly into four suites, sound radically distinctive.

There is, however, plenty of continuity here too, as one might expect from what is essentially a solo album with a few guest spots. The music is jarring but not ragged, moving from one idea to another with slow resolve. Dynamics range from near-silence (really; you have to turn the volume up to ten before you hear anything) to crushing, deafening cacophony, and the experience of listening to Foussat's music is always one of uneasy tension.

It's that tension, more than anything else, which defines Foussat's aesthetic. He likes intense sounds -- babies crying (screaming, really), grinding metal, extreme high pitches -- but he doesn't employ them for confrontational purposes. Indeed, the whole thing seems brought off with refreshing good humour and a sense of unpretentious fascination with the sounds themselves.

It's probably true that we ask something extra of music like this. If it's going to make us feel so tense, we say, it had better give something in return. Foussat's music, fortunately, does; it has above all an impeccable sense of timing. That means not only that nothing outstays its welcome (there are twenty tracks here, ranging from six seconds to nine and a half minutes) but that things change at their own pace, sometimes slow and sometimes quick but always appropriate.

A record as diverse and superficially spikey as this one will always be a bit of a challenge, but Foussat sounds oddly eager to make his music as accessible as he can. He does this not by inserting or superimposing familiar elements but by organising his pieces with attention to detail and a real sense of drama. One has the feeling in these pieces of ideas being revealed as if they were on a stage. Not a relaxing listen, but then who wants a relaxing listen anyway?

Richard Cochrane

This review first appeared in Avant magazine.

Fred Frith Guitar Quartet --Up Beat (Ambiances Magnetiques: AM063CD)

Fred Frith, Mark Stewart, Nick Didkovsky, Rene Lussier (electric guitars)

Frith's compositions are complicated, fiddly, four-part affairs, and very enjoyable for being so. The opener threatens to plunge the listener into some kind of virtuoso-fest we thought people had stopped doing in the 1980s and, lo, they had: virtuosic it is, empty technical fireworks it's most certainly not. The group's careful balancing of dissonances keeps the music moving but never lets it get comfortable; a track you'll be putting on compilation tapes for months, mark my words. Along with their Country and Western pastiches which, far from being as tedious as these things usually are, make interesting music out of a tradition which, for better or for worse, has inescapably moulded the electric guitar tradition.

Didkovsky, on the other hands, writes much more abstract stuff. "Anteus" works by a slow-moving system of drones; the wonderfully-titled "To Laugh Uncleanly at the Nurse" gives the soloists some angular, symmetrical harmonies to rub up against; "Out to Bomb Fresh Kings" is ninety seconds of pure art-metal. Lussier and Stewart contribute just one piece each -- respectively, a characteristically startling noise-fest and a bluegrass-tinted hundred-yard-dash which seems to have got nasty-drunk and smudged its mascara, pardoning my mixed metaphors (perhaps the mixed metaphor is a perfect vehicle for the oddly hopeless project of describing music in words -- just a thought).

All of the music is, as you might expect, flawlessly played, with precision where it's called for and gusto always. One of the joys of this disk -- and there are plenty -- is the inclusion of six group improvisations. Put four guitarists in a room and what usually happens next isn't worth wasting tape on. These four create really thoughtful, restrained music, keeping pieces short and to-the-point.

Another pleasure is the inclusion of the solo pieces, which help to get a picture of the individual players whose sounds are so subsumed to the group most of the time. These are not to be interpreted as live improvisations; they're all subjected to studio procedures, overdubbing in particular. Lussier shows off his conventional chops on what sounds like an acoustic steel-string; Frith shreds fretboard with a two-handed-tapping piece which, against the odds, is far from terrible (such things so often are); Stewart, their resident C&W maverick, plays a short tremolo arm study; and Didkovsky (bless him) makes a big, big noise, a kind of Caspar Brotzmann wall of sound which contains a wealth of detail.

All told, this is required listening for bedroom pickers and strummers, and there's plenty to enjoy even for those who don't know their Floyd Rose from their Ernie Balls. The music is accessible but not in the least bit tame, virtuosic but not self-satisfied, completely individual but littered with helpfully familiar reference-points. It even has inside artwork which manages to be designy and information-rich at the same time. Those who get a kick out of big, exciting, ambitious guitar albums, put it on your list.

Richard Cochrane

Ganelin Trio: Con Affetto

([Golden Years of New Jazz](#): GY2)

Vyacheslav Ganelin (piano, horns, percussion, little instruments), Vladimir Tarasov (percussion, horn), Vladimir Chekasin (reeds, percussion)

This is one of the four debut releases of Leo's new offshoot, "Golden Years of New Jazz", a somewhat ironically-titled label whose intention is to remind us that free jazz has been around for a rather long time, that it's a well-established genre with famous figures, classic recordings and, yes, "golden years".

This live Moscow recording finds the Ganelin Trio in good health in the autumn of 1983, and neatly reminds us of the origins of Leo Records and the now-famous CDLR101 and 102, the first astonishing glimpse of a Soviet avant garde jazz which sparkled and shimmered from its semi-illicit existence behind the iron curtain.

The group had been together for over a decade when this session was recorded, and of course the Trio has always been known for its odd brand of cohesion, the feeling they create of constantly almost-falling-apart and yet all landing together on some melody or other which seems to arise out of nowhere. One would have to be made of stone to find nothing to enjoy in the Ganelin Trio's recorded output.

The main bulk of this issue is a single piece "Semplice", issued for the first time in unaltered form. It's a performance lasting nearly an hour which is clearly built up from various sections. The first fifteen minutes, oddly enough, are virtually all percussion, but then there was always something odd about this group's strategies anyway. A fine piano solo by Ganelin follows, turning corners every few seconds and interrupted now and again by a cheap keyboard which he transforms into something strangely beautiful.

Chekasin doesn't seem to turn up until halfway through the set (though he's surely there making funny noises), but when he does he seems to signal a radical change in the music's direction. Like Ganelin, he enjoys intricate lines which never stay the same for long; both are expert at making abrupt changes seem both disconcerting and perfectly logical. Shortly afterwards, quite naturally, they drop into a lovely, bluesy hard bop piece which could just as easily be a Hank Mobley tune.

A couple of choruses in, they start deconstructing it from within, and it soon collapses into sprays of wild improv, but the music never gets far from jazz (the kind with tunes) after that. For encores, they take "Mack the Knife" (not like any other version you'll hear of it), a swoony mid-tempo ballad (untitled, but seemingly composed) and for the big finale... What else but a rarefied piece of chamber improv?

The figure of the clown has always been close to what the Ganelin Trio are all about. The sense of knockabout fun which seems to emerge from time to time in these otherwise very serious improvisations can be disconcerting. It has none of the arch cleverness of No Wave postmodernism, either; it's unadorned pie-in-the-face clownery. That's something Westerners find hard to accept, because for us experimental music is supposed to be avant garde, serious, cutting-edge. This disc probably won't add much to the Ganelin catalogue in terms of telling us anything new, but it does serve to remind us what a fine band they were, and how weird, uncategorisable and hard to pin down. If you're a confirmed Ganelin fan, this most certainly won't disappoint.

Richard Cochrane

Ganelin Trio: Poco-a-Poco

([Leo](#): CDLR101)

Vyacheslav Ganelin (piano, basset horn, dulcimer, guitar), Vladimir Tarasov (drums), Vladimir Chekasin (reeds, wooden flutes, ocarina, voice)

The Ganelin Trio are a group more often name-checked and written about than actually listened to, more's the pity. They have enormous kudos as revolutionary Soviet free jazzers, playing their wildly idiosyncratic music in the dark days of Khrushchov. It's easy to think of them as lone souls battling for "freedom" (which usually, in such discourses, means "Western freedom", even "American freedom"). Listening to their music seems almost spurious, as if the idea of them were enough, and the idea of fugitive tapes smuggled across borders, of LPs released in the West without names of the musicians, to protect the innocent.

It seems thus, anyway, until you hear their music which, once heard, never leaves you. It's not much like American free jazz, despite how things look on paper: melodic "head" arrangements, swirling solos, a sax-piano-drums trio pounding out intense improvisations to a pounding pulse. No, it doesn't sound much like the music one imagines when reading such a description; it sounds like the Ganelin Trio, and nothing else on earth sounds much like that.

This is, of course, not a new release but a re-issue, and in fact a re-issue of the earliest recording (1978) of their music to have appeared in the West. Like its successors, this is a live recording with startlingly good sound. Fortunately here the musicians are identified, right down to the details like Ganelin's beautiful spell on basset horn. Elsewhere, Chekasin enchants with ocarina and wooden flutes and Tarasov plays a thrilling drum solo. Now when was the last time you heard one of those?

Richard Cochrane

The Ganelin Trio: Strictly For Our Friends

([Golden Years of New Jazz](#): GY13)

Vyacheslav Ganelin (piano), Vladimir Tarasov (drums), Vladimir Chekasin (reeds)

This release restores to the catalogue a set recorded in Moscow during the same period which produced [Poco-a-Poco](#) and *Con Fuoco* (both also on Leo Records). Label boss Leo Feigin has suitably hair-raising tales to tell about getting the music from performance in the USSR to LP in London, but this music would be splendidly alive even without the high drama which surrounded its first release.

In a sense there are no surprises here. The quartet play eight untitled, jazzy compositions with a vigour which is almost frightening, even when the tempo is ostensibly that of a ballad -- check out the fidgety, shuffling Tarasov, bringing the otherwise nocturnal fifth track to a dangerous simmer. They move easily from straight changes-playing through intense freedom into weird abstract soundscapes. "No surprises", then, only in one sense; in another, their music is pure surprise, and it grabs your attention with every bar.

It's true that, as the sleeve notes point out, this is a rather more lyrical offering than some of the trio's more combative sets. Still, those expecting not to be jarred by the Ganelin Trio's very own brand of rushing exuberance really ought to have bought something different, and these pieces certainly aren't pedestrian. Whatever pressures the authorities might have placed jazz musicians under to be more accessible to the people or to compete with the mainstream players of the West, this trio always sounds entirely oblivious to it.

That in itself can make this music sound like a triumph of the human spirit (or some such), but in a sense that does the music itself no favours. Had these three come from New York, what they do would still be magnificent, and if it wouldn't have had such a big impact that's because the media loves a good story, something which helped an unknown avant garde jazz band who were a long way from home make a big splash in London when they finally visited.

None of that, however, should be allowed to detract from the music, which is as ecstatic and furiously inventive as ever. Far from being a grab-bag of extras for Ganelin completists, there's nothing disposable here, and the set as a whole has very much its own pace and flavour.

Richard Cochrane

Geerken Tchicai Moye: Cassava Balls

([Golden Years of New Jazz](#): GY4)

Martmut Geerken (piano, percussion, little instruments etc), John Tchicai (reeds, percussion), Famoudou Don Moye (percussion)

This is one of the four debut releases of Leo's new offshoot, "Golden Years of New Jazz", a somewhat ironically-titled label whose intention is to remind us that free jazz has been around for a rather long time, that it's a well-established genre with famous figures, classic recordings and, yes, "golden years".

John Tchicai certainly is one of free music's heroes, even if history seems destined to consign him to the B-list. He doesn't deserve it; as adherents will already know, his sour, iron tenor sound with its deceptively simple melodic shapes is one of free music's enduring pleasures. Here, there's no question that he's on top form, but what this group play is quite unlike much of what he was doing in the 1980s.

This is a live document of an Athens appearance by this trio shortly after they had toured Africa, on 5 May 1985. Superficially, they do energy music; screaming, pedal-to-metal stuff which sounds extraordinarily loud at any volume. The opening track, "Patriotic Poem Number One Forty Years After", is a "composition" by Geerken whose score is roughly as follows: "Everybody dashes to his instrument on stage as fast as he possibly can and starts to play as loud and fast as possible, as much as possible and as quickly as possible without a second's delay" (his words, not mine).

The outcome is an ugly mess, marred especially by Geerken's can't-play-will-play approach to the poor piano, which he seems to be simply flailing at with all of his limbs at once. Don't let it put you off, though, because what happens after they turn the heat down is surprisingly good.

The straight free jazz pieces -- including Parker's "Mohawk" and Ayler's "Mothers" -- account for the majority of this disc, and Tchicai handles them masterfully, with that quick-fire capacity to surprise which he usually deploys in more reserved settings. His tone is almost rubbery, so far from Lester Young they could be playing different instruments, but there's a singing quality to much of the playing here which distances Tchicai from the screamers whom he has so victoriously outlived.

Geerken is a wild card. He's a noise-maker of the sort one sees a lot these days, but didn't see that much of fifteen years ago; a guy with a table full of odds and sods who "plays" by making weird noises at appropriate (or inappropriate) moments. Those expecting a traditional free jazz session will be irritated by his ridiculous piano playing, or the charity-shop electronic sounds and farting noises which rudely punctuate some furious playing by Tchicai and Moye.

Yes, it takes a while to get used to Geerken, but if you open up your ears he can be enlightening, very musical and very funny, sometimes all at the same time. He certainly makes this an eccentric and very peculiar record, and his solo spot, making heavy use of short wave radios, is hardly what you expect from an energy music trio with Tchicai and Moye. But it does work, strangely enough. "Cassava Snake One Pot" is really quite funny, especially heard in conjunction with the anecdote (I won't spoil it for you), but it's not all jokes with Geerken. His use of rattles and shakers recalls the work of Pharaoh Sanders at the same time as his more avant garde techniques look forward to musicians like Adam Bohman, who make sounds with objects and dare to call it music.

This isn't for everyone, and some Tchicai/Moye fans are going to get a shock, but that's no bad thing. As the title of the label points out, this stuff has been around a long time, and there are mouldy figges in free jazz just as there are in bebop or swing. If this rattles a few cages, it's probably because it refers at the same time to the New Thing and what were, in 1985 at least, some new things. Other points of interest include covers of Parker's "Mohawk" and Ayler's "Mothers" (previously unissued, and interesting if not essential) and, allegedly, "the longest solo by Famoudou on record", a wild free exploration. Initially off-putting, this disk is nevertheless recommended to those willing to give it a chance, who will find a great deal to enjoy in this rather unique session.

Richard Cochrane

Philip Gelb: Between/Waves

(Sparkling Beatnik: SBR0006)

Philip Gelb (shakuhachi), Pauline Oliveros (accordion, conch), Jon Raskin (saxophones), Dana Reason (piano), Chris Brown (electronics)

Two tracks showcasing Gelb's shakuhachi alongside, on the one hand, Oliveros, Raskin and Reason and, on the other, Chris Brown. The results are very different, both from one another and from the excellent trio CD [Indistancing](#) (released earlier this year) in which Gelb played a part.

The first piece, the quartet, has a feel which is familiar from other Oliveros projects. It begins as a quiet, spacious environment in which the group bounce little sounds around, growing into something more dynamic as the ideas develop. All four musicians seem determined not to over-play; at the outset, this inevitably leads to some moments of uncertainty. What's gratifying, however, is that the interaction between these players -- often in fleeting duos or trios rather than as a quartet -- quickly firms up, and just gets better as the piece goes on. Nothing hangs around for long, but if the journey is aimless, that's surely part of the point. The pleasure is in the sights one sees along the way, after all.

Just for Oliveros' light-fingered accordion, this track is worth the hearing, but Gelb's resolutely non-Japanese shakuhachi is also a pleasure. Reason spends much of her time sitting out, but that's no crime, and when she does come in she does so in a clear and decisive way. Raskin is harder to nail down because his tactic seems to be one of augmenting the surrounding music, perhaps because he blends so well with Oliveros and Gelb. In all, it's a very pleasant journey indeed.

For the final eighteen minutes, Gelb changes pace by way of a duet with Chris Brown. The latter has a composer credit, so presumably some of his electronics are pre-programmed to give a shape to the piece. They're very effective; shimmering, dubby textures for the most part, cunningly transforming themselves and zipping around the stereo field. He also processes Gelb's shakuhachi, which is sounding a little more traditional on this session.

These effects consist mainly of heavy echo and reverb, which can lend the music a TV-soundtrack sheen, but this is hardly academic electroacoustics anyway. The glossiness of Brown's music comes to fruition in the Schutze-like rhythm which develops about halfway in and never really goes away thereafter. It's not without the odd miss-step -- a generic 4/4 rhythm on a rather tinny tambourine sound threatens to overstay its welcome at one point -- but then one has to accept that, for all its atonality and often harsh textures, this piece owes more than a little to acid jazz and even trip hop. Yes, the connection is tenuous, but you could certainly dance to the last half of this track even if it wouldn't go down to well with your average blunted beat-head.

There's something terribly likeable about this approach which will have you playing the track again and again. Plus, although he gives Brown plenty of elbow room, Gelb is on magnificent form here. People will approach this record for all sorts of reasons -- for Oliveros, for the electronics, for the Japanese connection (which is pretty distant), for Reason herself, who has built up a reputation of her own -- but it's hard not to enjoy it whatever you're looking for. That's not to imply that either piece is a lightweight offering, but there is a good-natured sense of the pleasure of playing running through this music which is extremely contagious.

Richard Cochrane

Joachim Gies: Different Distances

([Leo Lab](#): CD052)

Duets with Ute Döring (voice), Alex Nowitz (voice, electronics), Ernst-Ludwig Petrowsky (alto sax), Thomas Wiedermann (trombone), Thomas Böhm-Christl (cello)

Joachim Gies is a rather gestural saxophonist with a solid background in jazz and strong avant garde attachments. He can sound like several completely different players -- a jazz man, a free-former, even a classical performer. That's both a strength and a weakness in this set of 22 brief duets with assorted performers (plus a solo track, of which more in a moment).

These partners really are most unlike. Döring is a classical mezzo, singing composed lines in a mostly standard classical tone. Nowitz, on the other hand, is an avant-gardiste whose electronics are wonderfully atmospheric, his singing almost subliminal. Just between these two, Gies switches from a clean-toned, precise articulation of what sounds like a written-out part to a world of squeaks and percussive effects for which no notation has yet been devised. It could be two different musicians.

Wiedermann on trombone sounds unaccountably like Oren Marshall on tuba -- rumbling, textural, a huge sound with a patient intelligence crouching behind it. Gies sits back and gives him room in their duets, though he's not afraid to step forward now and again, as on the lovely, teasingly short "auf immer". He gets to say more with cellist Böhm-Christl, who is temperamentally very close to the reed player and probably his most natural duettist.

Gies reserves this claim for Petrowsky's alto -- that is, Gies finds their sound and conception substantially similar. In fact, Petrowsky is much more in the Rollins mould, a player who likes to develop motifs in a very linear way. Put this jazz-based approach next to Gies, whose use of repetition and rhythmic variation is much stronger, and you have two really quite different saxophonists. When the two play together, they tend to take up the same idea and run in different directions with it. This is a highly effective technique, and it would be nice to hear more of this pairing, perhaps even dealing with some compositions.

What feels a little unsatisfactory in all this is that, good as each piece is, nothing lasts long enough to really get your teeth into, and each piece is quite jarringly dissimilar from what came before. A whole disk with any one of these partners would have been interesting, with the possible exception of Döring. That's no criticism of her contribution, but Gies' compositions, while nice enough, are pretty unsubstantial. Listened to end-to-end, this disk feels a bit of a mish-mash. The vignette format suits some -- Böhm-Christl and Nowitz -- but Wiedermann seems distinctly cramped. Even the odd track out, Gies' seven-minute solo, breaks down into distinct sections showcasing specific techniques or ideas.

Gies is a good player, but he has a way to go yet before he's ready to hold together such a disparate disk and make sense of it. There are few performers who could carry it off in any case. Still, it's churlish to heap too much criticism on a player who takes a risk which doesn't pay off. Each of these tracks is enjoyable in itself, and with judicious programming once can create any of five short EPs, five distinctive and satisfying listening experiences. Which sounds like value for money to me.

Richard Cochrane

Matt Turner: Crushed Smoke

([Tautology](#): 014)

Matt Turner (cello)

Joachim Gies: Whispering Blue

([Leo Lab](#): CD074)

Joachim Gies (reeds)

Brian Allen: Solo Trombone

([Braintone](#): No Number)

Brian Allen (trombone)

Solo recordings are one of those things which can be fantastic or dreadful depending on the approach taken. Some people appear to think that somebody out there wants to listen to an hour of them showing off various techniques or practicing new ones. Not these two: both Gies and Turner have done it before (recording solo, that it), and both choose to turn in CDs full of music rather than practice tapes.

Turner's disk is one of those that just won't stop jumping into your CD player. He characterises it as noise-based, and it certainly uses the extremes of the acoustic cello's sonic possibilities, but the attention to detail here is wonderful and Turner's discipline in sticking to an idea and developing it with care and attention is remarkable. We've heard him in a solo setting before (["The Mouse That Roared", on Meniscus](#)) and been impressed by this ability to focus but expressed reservations about a certain, well reservation in his playing. Not so here; the more extreme timbres, and perhaps a more relaxed atmosphere, enable him to really open up.

There are some pieces here which work in part because of the extreme limitations of the palette, like certain paintings done all in shades of blue (Picasso, Kandinsky), or in contiguous areas of clashing colour (Klee). "Smoking Carnivore" is one of these, created mainly from the sound of the bow being scraped too hard and too slowly across the strings. The resulting sound is perhaps similar to but not as radical as Hand Tammen's "Styrofoam", but the very decision to use a cello rather than something more suited to the production of these kinds of sounds allows the instrument's more recognisable timbres to occasionally leak through. The overall effect is something like a brutal modernist painting done on top of something trivially pretty, the palimpsest of Romanticism (if you can pardon the pretentiousness for a moment) peering out from the patina of the contemporary. Nothing could be more postmodern or, frankly, more fun.

At times, Turner reminds this writer of Tammen in other ways, too; his approach to extreme and sometimes blackboard-scrapingly nasty timbres is similarly unflinching. But there are moments of real, if savage, beauty on this record. The two tracks featuring electric cello are a bit less raw and characterful, but they're quite funky and oddly reminiscent of the opening of Gies's solo outing.

Just as Turner sometimes turns to percussive, pulsing structures within which to make things happen, as on the bow-bouncing "Tap", Gies opens with a circular-breathing piece composed on a bed of cyclic key-clicks above which long, trilling notes appear as if by magic. They appear, of course, when Gies increases air-pressure and turns the clicks into notes, but somehow the brain, which is used to hearing rhythms with melodic phrases superimposed over them, hears it that way instead. It's clever and cool and instantly appealing.

Not everything here is so accessible, but it's all of good quality. The music, as the title suggests, is often very quiet and rather subtle, but then so is Turner's supposedly "noise"-based CD. There are differences, though -- big, important differences. Turner and Gies both enjoy extended techniques, but the cellist allows them to inform his musical choices (which is a perfectly valid and, in his case, effective way of proceeding) while Gies gives the impression of being in full control deploying notes slowly and quietly into an enigmatic silence.

There are some technically astounding things on here -- the things Gies can do with a trombone mouthpiece wedged into the neck of a tenor sax must be heard to be believed -- but that's not really the point. As with Turner, weird techniques may be the starting-point for some of these pieces but they certainly aren't the end they aim at. Gies creates music of real vividness, and that's what makes this CD extremely good.

Allen's self-released CD-R may be less high-profile, but it reveals a lesser-known talent who may do bigger things. He's something like an old-fashioned pit-orchestra trombonist, fond of slapstick effects and noises; he weaves them into a music which owes at least as much to brass band and folk music as it does to jazz.

The twenty tracks here are mainly short expositions of ideas. Allen's technique isn't entirely secure, but then people who go in search of this sort of record don't expect perfection), and in fact this very quality of slight shakiness adds to the down-home feel. One hopes this isn't patronising; Allen has a genuine love of the less

prestigious traditions of his instrument, and that's what gives this recording much of its character.

There are some real moments of musical imagination here, too; in the punningly-titled "Berne Baby Berne", he takes a mournful, descending melody which could come from a spiritual or a colliery band and passes it through a series of perfectly logical transformations, an achievement which points, perhaps, to deeper things beyond the frankly very enjoyable fun and games.

Richard Cochrane

Goldstein and Wilson: Monsun

([True Muze](#) : TUMUCD9801)

Malcolm Goldstein (violin), Peter Niklas Wilson (bass)

A meeting of jazz and classical, at least on paper. Wilson has a pedigree which includes Braxton, Derek Bailey, Marion Brown and John Tchicai; Goldstein tours with a string of New Music and dance ensembles. But this is a million miles away from the rarefied chamber improv which often comes of such collaborations, the minute, Cagean soundworlds of many London-based ensembles being one example.

No, this is tough, loud playing which moves quickly, using uncomposed melodic lines as frameworks on which to hang embellishments and wild, tangential developments. Although Goldstein is a classical player, he has a firm grasp of improvisations and is clearly influenced by the harsh, driving textures of Eastern European folk fiddle. And while Wilson has free jazz under his fingernails, he also has a strong command of those extended timbres which European improv borrowed from classical experiments nearly forty years ago. This isn't so much a culture clash, then, as a meeting halfway -- it just isn't the halfway point you might have expected.

Instead of diffuse "insect music", this duo play with the expressive devices associated with Romanticism, making their music a good deal more fiery. This can be seen in [Dominic Duval's Equinox Trio](#), too, and one wonders whether this is a new movement, an emancipation of techniques once derided as cynical emotionalism by the modernist vanguard. At times, Goldstein reminds this listener of Hendrix; not so long ago, that might have been seen as a criticism, a betrayal of the music's radical agenda by comfortable bluesy or folksy gestures. Not any more -- players seem more confident now of using these devices without falling into a generic trap. It's an exciting development, if it really is a trend and not an aberration. It links up with a rediscovery of folk music -- especially from Eastern Europe -- which has also characterised much of this decade's experimental music.

Goldstein and Wilson are, as a duo, very contemporary, very exciting and completely uncompromising. Don't expect, on the basis of what's been said above, tunes or key centres or metrical rhythms. This is hard-line free improv; but it has a different flavour from much of what we have come to associate with that genre.

Richard Cochrane

Vinny Golia: Clarient

([Meniscus](#): 008)

Vinny Golia (clarinet)

Vinny Golia's clarinet is as sweet as birdsong, and it's astonishing to read that this is his first solo recording for twenty years. He sticks to Bb Clarinet here, which makes a welcome change from the multi-instrumentalism which is so often a means of keeping a perceived risk of boredom at bay in solo reeds projects.

Another choice soloists often make is to record either brief "haiku" (o most offputting term) or extremely long, structureless jams. It's easy to see why both routes are tempting ones to take, but this disk contains nine medium-long tracks (broadly between five and ten minutes) which in itself is actually quite unusual. Pieces of this length require some identity of their own, but also some development beyond the sketchiness of the short form.

Fortunately Golia is adept at improvising at this length. He has a flowing, apparently easy melodicism and a timbral palette which ranges from round notes which taste of umami all the way to crashing multiphonics and ultra-high-pitch squeaks. None of these more avant techniques is used for mere punctuation or dramatic effect, however; Golia has a little of Steve Lacy in his playing, and he's a singer first and foremost.

It's great to hear a solo reeds album which doesn't feel under pressure to be a manifesto or a calling-card. Although he's not as well-known as he ought to be, Golia's voice is a well-established one by now and the self-assurance on show here is as impressive as the virtuosity. Highly recommended.

Richard Cochrane

Matt Turner: The Mouse that Roared

(Meniscus: MNSCS002)

Matt Turner (cello)

Matthew Goodheart: Songs from the Time of Great Questioning

(Meniscus: MNSCS001)

Matthew Goodheart (piano)

Dan DeCellis: Chamber Music

([Sachimay](#): SCA9350)

Dan DeCellis (piano), James Coleman (theremin), Anita DeCellis (voice), Katt Fernandez (violin), Gary Fieldman (percussion)

Leandre/Occhipinti: Incandescences

(Tonesetters: TS007)

Joelle Leandre (bass), Giorgio Occhipinti (piano)

Pianists often seem to have the weight of the classical tradition on their shoulders, just like saxophonists have the jazz greats looking over theirs. Here are releases which, in different ways, seem to engage with that tradition without being weighed down by it.

Although Occhipinti is a young jazz pianist, his playing here with Leandre has strongly classical, ven Classical, resonances. The whole thing can often sound like a sonata for double bass and piano, conceived by a delerious Hindemith. If that doesn't sound much like a compliment, it is. These two create wonderfully rich chordal structures, finding a place somewhere between functional harmony, jazz and atonality with not a note agreed in advance.

Occhipinti is great at varying the levels of density in his playing, a concept which his partner for this session understands only too well. And just as the music can range from big, loud chording to light, detailed playing, so it also covers the ground between the melodic and almost soothing right through to (occasional) blasting or insectoid improv. Those who don't know this pianist's work are urged to check this out; it's very impressive, and Leandre, always a valuable duettist, works wonderfully with him throughout.

Dan DeChellis, on the other hand, takes his classical influence sufficiently to heart as to refer to what he does as "Chamber Music", and to call himself a "composer". This group of three improvisations certainly has a strong whiff of Boulez about it, a kind of crepuscular quiet having crept over even the noisier parts, of which there are rather few.

Instead, Anita DeChellis's impeccable soprano bobs and weaves in an environment rather like that of the magnificent Pli Selon Pli, all tiny gestures which seem to join up, across the delicious gaps, to create something distantly related to melodic lines. Special mention should also go to Coleman's fantastically melodramatic theremin, sounding more like Messiaen's Ondes Mertenot in these settings than the sci-fi camp it usually conjures up.

Matthew Goodheart also sounds as if he has a debt to Boulez, but this time to his intense Piano Sonatas rather than his often spare chamber music. Goodheart's compositions (for so they are called) are frenetic, in-your-face Modernism, pin-sharp and bristling with detail. There's always plenty of detail to be heard in this kind of music, of course.

Where Goodheart does well is in coming out of the academic concern with structure and micro-level formal ideas and onto the level of the dramatic. Goodheart's music builds into surging crescendoes one moment, is glimpsed enticingly behind veils of chromatic noise the next. Doubtless Boulez and his coterie would have found such things hopelessly quaint and nostalgic, but they seem more contemporary now that the old "big ideas" have had their day. There is also a jazzy piece devoted to Ornette (not at all bad) and a piano interior piece (surprisingly funky), but what Goodheart does best is what he does most of the time here: atonal music of a pleasingly forceful clarity.

Richard Cochrane

Jerry Granelli & Badlands: Enter, a Dragon

([Songlines](#): SGL1523-2)

Chris Speed (clarinet, tenor sax), Peter Epstein (soprano and alto sax), Briggan Krauss (alto sax), Curtis Hasselbring (trombone), Jamie Saft (keys, guitar), J Anthony Granelli (bass), Jerry Granelli (drums)

Certainly a varied recording, this; even, on first listen, a bitty one. It combines the group playing compositions (mostly by Granelli) and politely taking solos with a series of "haikus" in which each band-member in turn duets with Granelli in a free improvised setting. The results are mixed in terms of listening to the album end-to-end, but there's a lot to enjoy here for the persistent.

It's a good band, which helps. Speed is a very capable and interesting player; the other two reeds men, though previously unknown to this writer except as names, also have nice things to say and this disc is rather tantalising in that respect. Hasselbring is a real winner, something like a brash, American Paul Rutherford, and Saft has a good handle on texture with his clavinet and accordion seeming to predominate. J Anthony Granelli is hardly a virtuoso but he's solid and most of his work here is supportive, though he can be irresistibly funky on tracks like "Sting Thing".

Jerry Granelli himself is a very flash drummer, funky and rocky rather than hard-swinging despite the fact that many of these pieces have a jazz feel. That gives the whole thing (bar the haikus) the feel of a seventies cop show theme; the saxes squealing to get out of their 4/4 box, the big, Lalo Schifrin harmonies shifting around like weather systems until the first solo comes in and blows them away like a strong wind. This is no bad thing. There's too much music around which focusses on the "retro" appeal of this material, and which as a result comes off cheesy and, at best, lightly amusing. What Badlands do is focus on the free jazz which was always bubbling under the surface of this kind of music, and they gain a special perspective from the distance between then and now. The results can be astonishingly good, as on "Shih", which regularly dissolves its brassy, macho theme in a piano-bass-drums whirlwind.

The haikus are nice, although they do break up the experience of listening rather distressingly. Hasselbring's is exceptionally good; Chris Speed, who's got his slurred, grouchy, croaky hat on for much of this disc, turns in a frantically inventive performance. Epstein and Krauss have similar styles, so it's nice to hear them set apart in their different haikus; Epstein worrying at a series of ideas with fluidly articulated gestures, Krauss taking a similar set of techniques into more lengthy melodies intercut with jazzy growls. No, they don't come across as geniuses here, but this isn't really a showcase for them, and it wouldn't be fair to judge them on the strength of it. Certainly their contributions to the ensemble pieces are inspired. Special mention to Saft, also, for his lovely haiku. There's no complaining over the quality of these pieces, it's just that they do rather break up the programme.

Nobody gets a great deal of room here except, fittingly, the drummer, who makes good use of it. The compositions are the stars, and many of them do work very well. Some can be just a touch too dirge-like -- "Berlin Sky" being the main offender -- but even then there's always a change of pace just around the corner. Cinematic and nostalgic, but defiantly contemporary.

Richard Cochrane

Guyvoronsky and Petrova: Chonyi Together (Leo: CDLR268)

Vyacheslav Guyvoronsky (trumpet), Evelin Petrova (accordion, vocal)

Guyvoronsky opens this CD like he's about to be in big trouble if he doesn't prove he's a virtuoso right now. The level of control he exerts over the trumpet while pushing it through the most punishing of workouts is astonishing, and the musicality of the result – a few histrionics, but mostly a beautifully vocal performance – is enough to sit you down and make you listen, whether you've heard of him or, like most listeners in the UK, not. The rest of the disk reveals something quite unique.

Guyvoronsky makes extensive use of composition, and while he's influenced by classical Modernism there's a very much stronger Latin American feel to most of the pieces here. Perhaps it's just the accordion, but the duo did make their debut appearance at the Astor Piazzola competition in Italy just six months ago, where they won a prize. These pieces sound like Piazzola in the hands of someone with none of his connections with tradition; these are tangos and waltzes which have been disassembled and joyfully reconstructed without regard for what is proper, only what is right.

Petrova's technical mastery, and her evident instinct for improvisation (this is her first improv gig, unlikely as that may sound) guide her through this music, but it's her sense of harmony which impresses, her ability to construct beautifully logical chord sequences on the fly without compromising Guyvoronsky's freedom to move. Her sound is ravishing, mostly avoiding the reediness associated with the accordion in favour of a timbre often reminiscent of a wind band. Her instincts when improvising are rarely wrong, and Guyvoronsky's writing for her is superb.

The trumpet player himself is both an original and a fine technician. He's poised, thoughtful and penetrating, always on top of his game and always finding something useful to say with even the most abstract material. Sometimes his straight playing can be deliberately awkward, following the most dazzling runs with something really quite lumpen, but that's part of his technique; constant juxtaposition and variation of approach (noises, notes, runs, shouting) over short periods, constant adherence to a single theme or idea for long periods. It's an unusual approach, and it takes a short time to get to grips with it, but it's worth the effort.

Strange that they should entitle the disk "Chonyi Together". Chonyi being the state of the Buddhist soul after death, wandering aimlessly in the universe in search of its place there (or something; so it says in the sleeve notes), one can only assume that these two musicians see themselves in some analogous way when they play together. Yet this music sounds too careful, too calculated in its effects, to come from a searching approach. No, this is masterfully prepared and performed, it's utterly deliberate in its effects, and it achieves them with brilliance and joie de vivre.

Richard Cochrane

Glen Hall: Hallucinations

([Leo](#): CDLR273)

Glen Hall (reeds, electronics, voice), Roswell Rudd (trombone), Nilan Perara (guitar), John Lennard (drums), Rob Clutton (bass), Barry Elmes (drums), John Gzowski (stringed instruments), Georgie McDonald (percussion), Judith Merrill (voice), Allan Molnar (vibes, marimba, tapes), Kim Ratcliff (guitars, banjo), Don Thompson (bass, piano)

The premise is almost so crushingly pretentious as to obscure the wonderful music within this CD; a "sonomontage" (oh yes), a film in sound dedicated to William Burroughs and inspired by two of his lesser-known prose works. It ought to be toe-curlingly contrived, but it isn't; ignore the programme notes and what you have here is a fantastic record.

Much of what's here is free-ish jazz, with Roswell Rudd playing better than this writer has heard him in a long time. With a line-up of little-known musicians, he creates a storming, swinging music. Gzowski is a fine guitarist, sounding something like Pat Metheny on the odd occasion when Metheny plays free jazz and really cooks it up (as he does with Ornette compositions, for example); Hall can really do that gutbucket tenor thing which may not be very sophisticated but certainly does the job.

These tracks are placed in a very odd ambience, which seems to refer to the radio theme which one finds repeatedly in Burroughs's work. Hall's production here is utterly unique and masterful; a homage to the otherworldly world of long- and shortwave radio in which, somehow, the instruments sound wonderfully lush. Anyone who has played idly with a radio will know how evocative the more distant channels can sound; this disk manages to capture that without at all compromising the clarity of the music.

This radio-influenced conception is carried over into some of the less jazzy pieces here, too. As well as radio sounds, Hall also includes spoken passages which further contribute to the feeling of a broadcast. The texts are all by Hall, with the exception of a very short interview segment from Burroughs himself, and they are so close to Burroughs's own style that they could only be deferential imitations. His own voice is treated by slowing it down, while Judith Merrill appears on only one short track, her voice subjected to some kind of flanging effect.

Hall does have a tendency to forget what a funny writer Burroughs was, and focus rather earnestly on his pursuit of alternate states of mind, as "A Few Questions for CONTROL" demonstrates, but his words aren't embarrassingly bad and the music is so utterly captivating that one would forgive him almost anything anyway. This is one of those records which you want to play again and again. Highly recommended.

Richard Cochrane

Glen Hall and Outsource: The Roswell Incident

([Leo](#): CDLR313)

[Glen Hall](#) (reeds, electronics), Roswell Rudd (trumpet), Allan Molnar (vibes), Michael Morse (bass), Michael Occhipinti (guitar, banjo), Banjo Barry Romberg (drums)

Bassrespanse

([Owlsong](#): OWL2001)

Vattel Cherry (bass), Jane Wang (bass), [Alan Lewine](#) (bass), David Kaczorowski (bass), Marjani Dele (voice, one track only), Benjamin Tomassetti (alto sax, one track only), Daniel Powell (tenor sax, one track only) [website: www.bassrespanse.com]

Hall's Outsource is different band from the one which appeared on "[Hallucinations](#)", but a similar sound thanks to the presence of the mighty Roswell Rudd and the extremely talented Allan Molnar on vibes, an unusual instrument to hear in this kind of funky, contemporary free jazz. Vattel Cherry's daring double bass quartet is working in a similar area, pulsed and recognisably jazzy, but of course in a very different sound-world.

Hall is a good enough reedsman although not an outstanding one; his main strengths are composition and arrangement, in which he recalls the likes of Threadgill, Richard Abrams and others of the Chicago school of free jazz which was more influenced by hard bop and the blues than the high-energy players whose names and music were perhaps better known at the time. As such, the music is broadly non-tonal but otherwise very traditionally jazzy; even those who normally shy away from anything more difficult than Monk or Blakey will find most of this music familiar.

The participants here are all of good stock: Occhipinti, in particular, makes a strong impression, a bit impersonal but full of great ideas. Rudd, of course, is majestic, and he and Hall make a frontline sound which is somehow bigger than it ought to be. Molnar's vibes cool the temperature a little, but he's as smart as a pianist and provides challengingly dynamic harmonies for soloists to bounce off. Romberg is a bit busy for this sort of thing, but not enough to cause problems; Morse holds everything together with a slow, slinky swagger.

This is a more focussed and much more impressive record than "[Hallucinations](#)". Fans of free jazz at the Tim Berne end of the spectrum will probably love it, and while it's not the most difficult thing Leo are likely to put out this year, it's extremely well-crafted and worthy of wider recognition.

It's one thing to do this kind of thing with two horns and a rhythm section, and another thing entirely to attempt it with four double basses. Vattel Cherry, however, as done just that, and pulled it off, too. Bassrespanse are an audacious undertaking, but the music is entirely convincing.

The arrangements are, as you might expect, the thing. These pieces contain a great deal of composition and the layering of percussive, pizzicato and arco elements enables the quartet to create their own virtual equivalent of drums and horns. There's very little cheating -- some small percussion instruments make appearances, nothing else -- and that's part of the pleasure of a group like this; one hears the whole palette of free jazz through a very specific filter, which can be extremely enlightening and full of surprises.

Solos are generally taken arco and, as you might expect, they're often more avant garde than the sorts of things Hall and Outsource get up to. Here there's far more energetic scraping or plucking going on, restless and often abandoning pulsed rhythms. These are emphasised, obviously, in collective improvisations like "Ready Set Go", but even these aren't undisciplined -- the four create sonic textures and stay with them, evolving them slowly rather than running about aimlessly as the title might suggest. There are also through-composed pieces like the gorgeous "Waltz for Four Basses" and the sprechgesang "Louis Devereaux", Dele's guest spot. The words of the latter tell a not-very-interesting story about the eponymous character watching his own funeral, but the performance is exuberant enough to carry it. The reedsmen guest together on the last track, a rather bitty affair with some nice moments.

Bassrespanse are, particularly as an unaugmented quartet, a fascinating listening experience. Not because groups of basses have never played this kind of music before, but because these players seem to have developed a way of playing it which is extremely effective, both traditional and experimental. By its very nature it may not be a long-lived project, so try to catch up with them if you can.

[Richard Cochrane](#)

Graham Halliwell and Simon H Fell -- ine Points in Ascent

([Bruces Fingers](#) BF24)

The pseudo-geometrical titles and the overall sound of this disk may recall Evan Parker, and Halliwell certainly shares some similar techniques. He is particularly fond of the soft, undulating texture which Parker creates with, say, Barry Guy, but he has some tricks of his own too. He prefers to follow what one might call a more jazzy logic in his solos, spontaneously creating lick-like phrases which make sense in context but are not typically pursued as motifs for very long.

It's good to hear Fell in such exposed space again. His work as a composer is undoubtedly important but, like his hero Charles Mingus, it's easy to forget what a fine bass player he is. He has an undeniable legitimate technique, but prefers to pull the bass in other directions, most of which will be familiar to the improv initiate. His quick-fire chromatic rumble, however, punctuated by noise-effects with seemingly impossible fluidity, is something all of his own.

Fell's most impressive duo and trio partners tend to meet him on his home ground, which is good old-fashioned improvised interaction with the emphasis on moving the music forwards and minimising the scrabbling about which comes with the territory. These are taught, focussed dialogues on the whole, musical ideas darting from one player to the other without ever seeming to come to rest. Indeed, the very obliquity of this music will probably remind some listeners of Parker and Guy (or Barre Phillips) even if these are musicians with something quite different by way of technique and approach. All of this is a credit to Halliwell, whose temperament seems to fit with Fell's so seamlessly.

These are both players with a rich palette of sounds and enough technique to get beyond gimmickry and into music of considerable depth and variety. One never misses a drummer here -- Fell alone plays plenty of percussion in between his notes -- and the addition of a third player might well have detracted from the rich texture which these two produce unfettered. Indeed, this feels oddly like a kind of re-fried energy music; no screaming blues references, of course, but such agitated rhythms, such a rush of ideas, that the listener can be left rather exhausted, if paradoxically energised as well.

Richard Cochrane

Haunted House: Up in Flames

([Erstwhile](#): 002)

Loren Mazzacane Connors (guitar), Suzanne Langille (voice), Andrew Burnes (guitar), Neel Murgai (daf)

Connors sounds here like an unhinged Mark Knopfler, peeling off pinging pentatonic scales and "emotive" bends like a bedroom bluesman in a cathedralful of artificial reverb. He should be terribly boring for just that reason, but what he does here is actually very involving; he invites us into an oddly postmodern, and very personal, universe where Ry Cooder has gone off the rails and Stevie Ray Vaughan's ghost has written a Beginner's Rock Guitar method.

Maybe it's the very prosaic nature of Connors' playing which makes this music so distinctive. There's a would-be guitar hero on every street who plays like this, noodling mournfully in A minor while waiting for his mum to call him for tea. Or at least, there used to be, twenty years ago, when kids still wanted to be guitarists rather than DJs or video artists or whatever they want to be these days. He doesn't try to do anything "avant garde" at all; even his chord progressions have that modal predictability which graces and disgraces thousands of home tapes around the world.

So why is this interesting, rather than rubbish? Is it due to some terribly posed irony which would have us listening with a cocked eyebrow and a wry smile playing about our lips? No, it's something else, and it's mostly to do with the partners who Connors has assembled for Haunted House and the sounds they make together. Although the harmonic and melodic language is a slightly less sophisticated version of "Brothers in Arms", there's a timbral language overlaid on it like a murky, evil patina, and that makes all the difference.

In a way, the star of the record is Murgai. This writer has no idea what a Daf looks like, but here he sounds as if he's moving heavy objects around and bumping gently into the microphones. A sinister, scraping shuffle occasionally intrudes on the extraordinary quantities of reverb, putting the whole atmosphere in motion like a pressure-wave. Meanwhile, mixed low, Langille's voice moans in beautiful, arching lines which are doubled by the reverberation into a phantom chorus.

There's something genuinely eerie about this combination of naive emotionalism and rather distant vocalisation in an ambience which threatens to drown everything and turn it into a sludge. Very, very weird stuff indeed, then; not alternative so much as conceptual rock, a music which relies on juxtaposition to create an effect which is disturbing and complicated. Perhaps they're a good live proposition, but this is really music to put on at night, with the lights down low, and get freaked-out by.

Richard Cochrane

Tim Hodgkinson -- ragma

[Recommended Records](#) (TH1)

Multi-instrumentalist Tim Hodgkinson has long proved a slippery customer to taxonomists: a free improviser who composes and who used to play in a legendary, if not quite famous, rock band. The days of Henry Cow long behind him, it's good to see Hodgkinson is still improvising, still studying anthropology, and still writing music.

The rock influence certainly seems to remain, particularly in the pulse-based rhythms which keep on emerging in these five chamber compositions supplemented by a tape piece. Hodgkinson uses ostinato-like figures to build textures over which melodic, rhythmic and timbral material sits. Mostly, this material is interesting; sometimes, as in the piano part near the start of "Black Death and Errors in Construction", it can turn unexpectedly from foreground into background. Indeed, this ambiguity between the two functions is a strength which is explored in some pieces more than others, and nowhere does Hodgkinson leave the solo/accompaniment paradigm completely behind.

His note-choices are determined by neither tonality nor serialism. Indeed, at times they seemed impressionistic, even Debussian, particularly in his piano writing. Sometimes these gestures turn into a kind of schlock Hollywood modernism (strong echoes of those "shower scene" chords from Psycho, even) but this doesn't happen too often. Sometimes, as in the organ writing in "Mala; Elated", his use of harmony is extremely thoughtful and effective.

Structurally, the pieces have an episodic quality, though at their best the transitions between their sections are smooth and organic. A becomes B becomes C becomes D. This linear form is a risk, however. The "becoming" sections inevitably feel more accomplished, more satisfying; but the process could go on indefinitely. Further, if this process of evolution should become less than compelling, the music invariable fails and it will be difficult to win over the listener again. Hodgkinson meets the challenge admirably, but he doesn't do it without a few glitches.

The tape piece -- "Shhh" -- is a collage of found and composed sounds, almost entirely vocal and often interestingly distorted by lo-fi analogue recording methods. With its long silences or near-silences punctuated by frenetic activity, this could have been a lost piece from Berio's Coro. Of course, the odd burst of industrial static or over studio manipulation tells you that this is something from the 1990s, and that's a strength too.

Richard Cochrane

Homo-Genetic Arsonist: F*ck Theory... Just Play, Goddamit

([Unsound Automatic](#) : UACD008)

Miggy Harries (guitar, vocals), Dafydd Harris (keyboards, guitar), Bill Bargefoot (bass), Rick Dragger (drums), The Jelly-bean King (drums)

"MANUFACTURER'S WARNING", says the insert, "Playing this thing too loud will HURT." It certainly will; if you go to see these guys live, take your earplugs. The intensity of this disc is pretty impressive -- it has the sleagehammer white noise of the hardest of industrial techno, complete with eardrum-rupturing high frequencies, and freestyle solos to boot. It also has Miggy Harries.

Miggy Harries is a kid. The claims of the publicity that he's only thirteen are easy to dismiss, but this is straight out of the Live Skull school of raw, unapologetic adolescent rage and there's no question that this kid is the real thing. He's got a puerile sense of humour, a yelling energy and a kind of subversive, up-yours attitude problem which puts him way, way beyond most gangsta rappers in terms of old-fashioned burn-down-the-school naughtiness. There are guys singing about adolescent trauma who now have to worry about their grandchildren's GCSE results; here's someone doing it who hasn't even taken his options yet, and the results are a whole lot less cut-and-dried. On "Disintegrated Cheese", he sounds distinctly like a young Captain Beefheart.

Harries also plays guitar, and is rather good at it. Sure, he's no technician and he's a long way from being comparable with musicians twice or three times his age who are developing a mature voice. He simply can't have heard or played enough music for that. Yet you can hear the musical imagination hard at work in his scalding, untutored solos. He needs time (of which he has plenty) and we have to assume he's serious about playing, but given both of those things he will doubtless become a strong musician with some distinctive ideas.

As for the rest of the band, well, there's a touch of schoolboy incompetence which fits the mood well. Dafydd Harries is a pretty rough-and-ready rhythm guitarist, but a slick chops-obsessed metallor would hardly have been appropriate. He bluffs and stumbles his way through the riffs, pinned down by the very baggy bass and drum partnership (Jelly-Bean King subs for Dragger on four of the seventeen tracks). His keyboard playing, however, is much more inventive, and his contributions to the title track are especially nice, showing an excellent attention to detail, while his work on "Telepathic Communicational Breakdown" is great. I really never thought I'd be saying this about such a calculatedly punky, anti-proper-music disc, but Dafydd Harries might just be a name to watch.

What we have here is a peculiar brand of improvised metal fused with electronica and large dollops of the punk ethos; it ain't pretty, it's not exactly groundbreaking, but there's plenty of fist-in-the-air moments and some more subtle, promising things scattered around. This writer has complained before that some people record too early these days and, if so, this would be a rather extreme example, but Unsound Automatic seem committed to capturing and documenting the more obscure corners of British musical life and this is certainly one of them.

Richard Cochrane

Various Artists: The Kakutopia Annual Report

([Unsound Automatic](#): UACD015)

Homo-Genetic Arsonist: The Proverbial Flaming Domicile

([Unsound Automatic](#): UACD014)

Mig Harries (vocals, guitar, drums), Peredur Gwladus (bass), Manwell Greig (keyboards), Dafydd Harries (keyboards), Rick Dragger (drums, vocals)

Master Class: Mindgarden

([Unsound Automatic](#): UACD009)

Derrug Claptona (guitar, vocals), Fred Bansen (keyboards, vocals), Bo "Porn" Craddock (drums), Baru Harrison (bass), Dawn craddock (keyboards)

Those bonkers boys from Kakutopia (aka Unsound Automatic) are back again, with what promise to be the last two proper album releases on the label and the second of their "annual reports", compilations which they intend to continue releasing however nicely we ask them not to.

Actually, it's hard -- but important -- not to treat these guys as a comedy outfit. Much of this material is silly, yes, and some of it is very funny. Take Gwilly Edmondez -- almost certainly a Welsh-Hispanic alias of Will Edmondes -- performing his touching "Plugs (for Emma)". One imagines him sitting on a bar stool with a tight spotlight and a guitar on his lap, the sensitive singer-songwriter about to perform a favourite ballad. Except that the playing is all pinging, off-key wrongness and the vocals consist entirely of burps.

Yet elsewhere on what can only be described as a very healthy annual report which is bound to please the shareholders, there are some really cool tracks which transcend plain (but to-be-encouraged) silliness. "Serious" electronic composer Richard Bowers, whose [Nocturne](#) received plaudits from (musings) last year, appears here again with the excellent "Succubus"[\[note\]](#), which packs a lot of music into eight and a half minutes and sounds much like an electronically-manipulated Ligeti. He also appears as producer of the pleasingly in-your-face SAAB

Under the banner of Kak (from "cack", meaning crap, rubbish) the group appears to have attracted some really cool bedroom fastracker music makers. Abel Aabab puts forward the extremely cool "Notte Santa", a track which David Shea would be proud of. Gwilly Edmondez returns with the brilliantly-named "Helen & Wendy -- Two Women", which turns out to be a nice (but too short) piece of swirling electronica. The guys at The Wire go wild over this sort of stuff. Tony Gage is obviously a clever composer who plays deliberately stupid (actually, it seems they all are), and "Frank's Breakfast" is a nice juxtaposition of "proper" atmospheric piano playing, cruddy guitar noodles and some dialogue from a 1950s movie.

Meanwhile, the traditional face of Kak, with its cruddy mum's-garage guitar dins and silly lyrics, can still be seen about the place. Tony Gage fuses his synth stylings (yes, "stylings") with some kak rock to pretty cool effects, while the aptly-named Slowband lazily rumble through some Beefheart territory. Surviv use tinny drum machines to approximate a sort of Skinny Puppy goth-techno which you can make at home for less than your giro money. Pukus (another good name) have a cool Hendrixian guitarist but only one little condenser mike, resulting in a nasty bootleg-quality recording, although the track *is* called "Hur Spittle", which is some compensation.

Psychedelic Spazstic Hamster's "Die Motherfucker" would sound very much like a candidate for kak. Instead, however, it provides four minutes of pure genius. It's a towering piece of trip-hop ranting filtered through school rock band sounds and re-fried in the "studio" (ie someone's bedroom) into a menacing but nigh-on dancable slab of, well, funk.

As for the album releases, Master Class sound very much like Radioactive Sparrow, and unless they actually are Radioactive Sparrow with different names ("Derrug Claptona"? We don't think so) then this is -- and how can one put this without it sounding hugely unlikely? -- they're very much derivative of the Rads. "Beautiful Noise -- Experimental Band" may be a good gag reminiscent of King Missile's less Kak "Sensitive Artist", but if they'd been around at the time they'd have been picked for the role of the band who live below the protagonist of "Driller Killer", making his subsequent killing spree all the more psychologically believable. But go and see them live, if they ever come your way, because their gigs are probably a riot.

Homo-Genetic Arsonist's second CD wins the controversial (muusings) Album Title of the Millennium award, and there's as much to enjoy here as on ["Fuck Theory"](#), his first release. It starts well, with Harries singing with a mouthful of water (or something), and it just stays on pretty much that level throughout. It's all a bit less edgy

than the first album, but Harries isn't setting himself up as a joke for adults to laugh at (for those who don't know, he's a schoolboy). His intentions seem quite serious, although he has a far more mature sense of what that means than the self-indulgent bands people like this writer were involved with at that age. The packaging of these releases has improved, too, and this is an object you'll be proud to own, in contrast with his previous release which was horribly (but appropriately) ugly.

If you only buy one rubbish record this year, make it Kakutopia's annual report. It's not "so bad it's good", but good despite having all the odds against it. Maybe they intended to make it crap and got it wrong. Maybe. One suspects not. In a nutshell, they've created a unique missive from a musical hinterland nobody seems to care about.

"Succubus" uses recorders as a primary sound-source; Martin Archer's most recent release, "Winter Pilgrim Arriving", also features recorders. And before hearing about either of these projects, this writer started working with recorders too. What was in the water around the middle of last year?

Richard Cochrane

KEV HOPPER -- Spoombung: New Music for Electric Bass

(Thoofa: THOOFA1)

Kev Hopper (bass guitar, musical saw, electronics), Ian Smith (trumpet, flugelhorn), Adam Brett (sampler), Charles Heyward (bells), John Butcher (saxophones), Rob Flint (assistance)

The bass guitar has never had much of an avant garde following, really; even Laswell takes heavy cues from funkateers like Bootsy and Stanley Clarke, and if you want to be the closest thing there is to hot property on the avant garde scene then you pay homage to your jazz roots by biting the bullet and playing the double bass. Of course, there are interesting experimental bass guitarists out there, but they don't tend to be high-profile; they tend to be team players whose identity is, to an extent, subsumed by a band. They don't, in other words, tend to record solo albums like this one.

Regardless of how the lineup looks on paper, this is Hopper's show. Ian Smith appears on two tracks, the others on one each, giving the bassman plenty of space to himself. Hopper mixes "live" with sampled playing, bass sounds with synths and non-bass samples, which gives this album the pleasant quality of being nigh-on impossible to analyse. His soundscapes seem densely layered, with the bass weaving in and out, appearing then submerging, flitting by disguised as an electronic blip, or appearing in a sample-haze mirage. It sounds as much like a contemporary ambient album as a solo bass workout, and there's no problem with that.

Proceedings begin with an airy six-minuter, the longest on the disk, which seems to be feeling out the space which the rest of the album will occupy, as if sending sporadic sonar messages to the bottom of some ocean trench. After this, Hopper's interest in African drumming takes over and we are, for the remainder of the album, in mainly rhythmic waters, propulsive and sometimes ametrical but throbbing ever forward. Containing, indeed, not a small quantity of funk.

It's time to talk about the spoombung now. This is a word -- a deliciously onomatopoeic word at that -- invented by Hopper to describe what is essentially a practice of preparation familiar to players of all stringed instruments, attaching crocodile clips and safety pins to the strings, or more brutally shoving lengths of wood or metal between or beneath them and so on. What Hopper brings into the equation, however, is a technical mastery of specifically bass-guitar-oriented techniques of slapping and popping the strings, using both hands percussively to create wonderfully bouncy cross-rhythms. The fact that Hopper's playing is so rooted in conventional bass technique, yet sounds so different, makes this more than just another prepared-strings exercise. And then watch out for the "assisted spoombungs", in which either Flint or Carter alter the preparations while Hopper plays, at some times resulting in gently shifting timbres, and at others, as on the self-explanatory "Croclipslipped", causing unpredictable mayhem.

This is a quiet, unassuming record which it is easy to miss the point of first time around. Hopper doesn't bludgeon the listener with technique or with new and exciting noises; he gently weaves a pattern which, like West African drumming, draws the listener in and plays out slow-moving, thoughtful complexities. Not that this is cerebral music; it's almost all about groove and about texture, which is why this listener was reminded of ambient electronica; it could almost have come out on Ninja Tune except that guys like Butcher crop up and the whole thing has a slightly-too-dark texture. Nonetheless, a cracking summer record from an eccentric inventor of new ways to make experimental music.

Richard Cochrane

Kev Hopper: Whispering Foils

(Duophonic Super 45s: DS45-CD26)

Kev Hopper (bass, saw, samples), Janie Armour (accordion, organ), Charles Hayward (cymbals), Dominic Murcott (percussion), Sean O'Hagan (guitar, voice), Andrea Spain (clarinets), Ian Smith (flugelhorn, trumpet)

Kev Hopper makes a welcome return, with another album of delicately-structured grooves, ably assisted by a team of guest musicians. Hopper plays bass like a percussion instrument, and surrounds it with sequenced samples. On this disk, he also introduces us to his musical saw, a sensuously gliding thing a million miles from (yet still reminiscent of) the novelty acts which, on British TV, used to grace a show called *That's Life*.

Hopper's guests are deployed with cunning, so that although there are only seven it sounds as if a different band appear on each track. The quality is very high; Hayward plays an extraordinary piece using cymbals, Armour's accordion turns "Canary Lights" into a deliciously desolate nocturne, Ian Smith's trumpet sounds like a bugle blowing out a reveille to wake "London Bells" from its juddering trance.

The music here is highly rhythmic and really rather funky, but with a drifting quality which gives the whole thing a real late-night appeal. Hopper's saw phrases its lines very much like a theremin, and Murcott's vibes seem to loll elegantly about the place, filling the music with little rounded notes, each one carefully weighed. O'Hagan, at one point, plays lazy fingerstyle guitar, occasionally adding some vocal "La la la"s as if he'd just thought it might be fun.

Hopper is a master technician on bass, using both hands percussively to create sinuous, undeniably catchy lines. He's also an imaginative user of samples, and his musical saw is sublimely Romantic, full of aching, arching note-transitions which are doubtless tongue-in-cheek (Hopper is far from being a sentimental player) but which also really work in the elasticated rhythm he creates. This, as anyone who has tried it will tell you, is no easy thing to achieve, and nor is the marriage of "live" and sequenced performances over which he presides here. This is finely-crafted music which sounds as off-the-cuff as you like; drop-dead cool.

Richard Cochrane

Horn/Kendig/Dicke -- Screwdriver!

([Leo Lab](#): CD051)

Walter Horn (keyboards), Gary Kendig (drums), Hugh Dickey (guitar, clarinet), Eric Hipp (tenor sax)

This is oddball, knockabout stuff with things in common with, say, Noble/Williams/Marshall over here -- which is to say, mostly electric, mostly improvised, mostly good-humoured pieces full of vitality. The key term here is "mostly", of course, because this trio, while they keep the temperature pretty hot throughout, demonstrate a wide range of approaches without ever sounding like a variety show.

Some names that are bound to get mentioned: King Crimson, Frank Zappa, Sun Ra. Still, none of these is much help. It seems that anything with electric guitars gets likened to Crimson these days (the prog rock band we're allowed to like, apparently) and anything free-jazzy with retro keyboard sounds immediately summons the name of Sun Ra. When these guys cook up a stink -- as on "Ambulance and Gas", for instance -- the excitement comes from a real fusion of hard-driving jazz and the energy of a Mahavishnu Orchestra going at full pelt.

They're fond of slightly awkward, stumbling ostinati, and although all three have technique to spare, solos tend to reach for an atonal version of the gutbucket blues rather than the scalar spirals which are too often a standby in this sort of music. "Welcome to the Lonely Village", on the other hand, is a lovely soundtrack-in-search-of-a-movie. None of those bludgeoning rock-outs there, and another indication of the trio's versatility. Those who like this kind of spiky, high-octane fusion -- and you know who you are -- will love this. It's a blast.

Richard Cochrane

Gregor Hotz: Solo

(FMP: OWN90012)

Gregor Hotz (reeds), Nicholas Bussman (cello)

Urs Leimgruber: Blue Log

([For4Ears](#): CDNR1137)

Urs Leimgruber (saxophones)

Seth Misterka: MOH

([Newsonic](#): 17)

Seth Misterka (saxophones, samples)

Too many of them there may be, and unapproachable they often feel, but there are times when only an ascetic solo saxophone album will do. Here are three very recent releases from artists you may or may not have heard of. There's Hotz, who's played sideman to Fuchs, Lacy and Koch; Leimgruber, whose quartet album with Marilyn Crispell was [reviewed](#) in the last edition; and finally there's Misterka, whose work with the [Middletown Creative Orchestra](#), [CCM4](#) and other groups will be known to regular readers.

Both Hotz and Leimgruber take a traditional, "vocabulary statement" approach, the latter much more than the former. Although both used "extended techniques" very heavily, Leimgruber's disc is by far the more virtuosic-sounding, and each piece draws some of its coherence from the fact that it focuses on a small and unique technical range; Leimgruber virtually uses timbre like Sonny Rollins used melody, as a source of constant, effervescent invention within a restricted orbit.

Hotz does take this sort of approach -- on "Mondo Cane", for example, he tries submerging his bass horn while playing it, something which sounds okay enough, although anyone who's listened to a lot of Lacy or Zorn will have heard it before. He's most effective, though, when he puts these kinds of ideas aside and simply pursues a stream of consciousness. The results are low-key and not, initially, very involving, but they're worth sticking with.

Leimgruber grabs you immediately and ensures that, at every moment, he has your full attention. Sometimes we need that, especially when he has such enjoyable ways to make good use of the attention got thereby. Hotz is a little more diffident, and doesn't seem to mind whether you listen or not. It can sound like a bedroom tape at times, but much of the music here is surprisingly imaginative once you let it get hold of you.

Hotz has Bussmann on the final third of the disc, which is an odd strategy because it makes the album look broken-backed before it's even out of the cellophane. There's a good fifty minutes of solo stuff here anyway, and it's hard to see what tacking these duets on the end was intended to achieve. They're nice enough, but the sleeve notes' claim that these two musicians share the same vocabulary isn't borne out by what's here. Bussmann is a pretty straight cellist, working mainly with long, bowed tones or rhythmic ostinati while Hotz takes solos. Both play well, but one yearns for a more dynamic rhythm section which would really stretch the reedsman so we could see what he's really made of.

Leimgruber's disc is shorter than the solo section of Hotz's, but it packs a terrific punch. As ever with such things, the insert assures us that there were no overdubs involved, and so Leimgruber's can-it-be-for-real techniques must be for real after all. Albums like this can be terribly tedious, and I suppose that someone with no interest at all in saxophone technique might find it a bit of a drag, but Leimgruber pushes his wildly eccentric vocabulary in some satisfyingly musical directions. The end results are consistently listenable assuming, as always, you like that sort of thing; and this disc has moments which are eye-bogglingly impressive both technically and musically.

Seth Misterka's solo disc is the shortest of the lot, and the least overtly serious-minded. While Hotz and Leimgruber -- quite properly -- try to boil down their musical conceptions in this most exposed of formats, Misterka layers percussion, electronics and other bits and bobs alongside his sax in an overtly overdubbed manner. The results are fun, and there are even tunes, which may come as a surprise to those who know Misterka as the hardcore modernist behind [CCM4](#).

The compositions -- for compositions they are -- are lumpy and distinctly badly-behaved. "Pizza Pete" sounds like it's barging through a crowd with a Pepperoni Special on each arm, while "Pornographic Music" takes the cinematic associations of the solo sax to their logical conclusion by dubbing on the sounds of people... well, you

work it out.

Misterka has a solid, if unconventional technique, but many of these pieces are played with gusto rather than precision, which only adds to the overall sense of bad attitude and cheerful make-do. None of this should be taken to imply that this is an easy record, with tracks like the bristlingly complicated "RAM the Robot" and the industrial noise collage "[12.1.99]". It's pretty harsh in places, but there's a sense of humour running throughout it which leavens what can otherwise turn into a rather lonely and frustrating kind of music.

This isn't really a solo sax record, in the sense that it's a solo record by a saxophonist who also does a lot of other things. It just shows how different these things can be, though, from the traditional solo reed workout. Not that there's anything wrong with those -- Leimgruber's, especially, is an excellent piece of work, and one hopes that we'll hear more from him in the future.

Richard Cochrane

Francois Houle 5: In the Vernacular

([Songlines](#): SGL1522-2)

Francois Houle (clarinet), Dave Douglas (trumpet), Peggy Lee (cello), Mark Dresser (bass), Dylan van der Schyff (drums)

Francois Houle & Benoit Delbecq: Nancali

([Songlines](#): SGL1519-2)

Francois Houle (clarinet), Benoit Delbecq (piano)

Two new discs from the excellent but under-reported clarinetist Francois Houle; one finds him in the company of his own arrangements of tunes by fellow traveller John Carter, the other in a mainly free-improvised setting alongside Delbecq's very stimulating piano.

"In the Vernacular" is the choice for those who like their improvisation framed by composed starting-points. Houle's arrangements of this material really are full of invention; this disc reminds this writer of albums like George Russell's "Ezz-thetic", with its apparently ordinary instrumentation given an odd twist by the auteur's ear for unusual harmonies and rhythms. In this case, Lee's cello adds some unexpected thickness to the middle-range of some of these lines, but it's the chordal arrangements which really strike the ear.

It helps, naturally, having Dresser and Douglas on board; both have, by now, proved whatever it is you have to prove in New York and risen pretty near to the top of the pile. Douglas gets plenty of solo space on this disc, which is always welcome, and as ever he fills it with light and air. Lee, on the other hand, gets very little, but her ensemble work is sure-footed when she's audible, which isn't all of the time. With van der Schyff proving his Elvin Jones-derived polyrhythms are up to the very hard job of nailing down these freewheeling-yet-controlled pieces, it's no wonder the group plays so well.

The compositions -- mostly by Carter, two by Houle -- are jazzy and noisy, sometimes with an African undercurrent. A band with a big brass section might have made heavy weather of them, but Houle's featherweight reeds turns them into dances. With Houle and Douglas taking most of the space, it's a near-essential session of contemporary jazz.

"Nancali" puts Houle in an altogether different environment. Benoit Delbecq is a highly-regarded Canadian pianist whose light-fingered but incisive touch suits Houle down to the ground, as long as you know that Houle does this sort of thing as well as the more composed stuff on "In the Vernacular". This is concentrated, thoughtful and rather impressive music-making, but for the most part it's also quiet and even unassuming.

It's a cliché, but Delbecq's preparations -- which he uses for much of this disc -- really do sound like those used in Cage's "Sonatas and Interludes". They have that indefinably nocturnal sound, especially when they're used to create soft, undulating ostinati, as in "Late Dance". Perhaps it's the muffled softness of the sound which is so evocative, possibly some tribal memory of the time when preparations were used to evoke the exotic otherness of the gamelan or the mbira. You could certainly, if you wanted to, draw a line from Debussy through Cage to Delbecq; even when the piano isn't prepared, the echo of the "Submerged Cathedral" can be heard in his open, ambiguous harmonies. (if you enjoy Delbecq here, his more high-energy appearance on a Leo release by the [Bertrand Denzler Cluster](#) is also worth checking out).

While Houle's lightening-fast playing makes the joyous "In the Vernacular" lift off into the sunny blue sky which it paints above itself, that lucidity has a different role to play in this duet. Even when working with extended techniques (of which he has a fair repertoire) there's a lightness in his music which defies the drizzly, film noir CD sleeve; this is music by clear moonlight, and Houle's clarinet is a cool breeze. If this sounds unforgivably purple, there is something of the Romanticism of the sixth-form poet in Houle's playing; it has a winning naivety behind all that sophistication.

Houle is a clarinetist who's well worth getting acquainted with, and one or both of these discs is probably the way to do it. They're very different, but each is of a very good quality. "In the Vernacular" is a lot of fun with a serious amount of musical invention, both in the arrangements and in the solos. Anything with Douglas on it is worth checking out anyway, of course. In such boistrous company, "Nancali" would be easy to overlook, and Delbecq along with it. It's an understated session, but a real grower.

Richard Cochrane

Hubbub: Ub/Abu

([For4Ears](#): No Number)

Frederic Blondy (piano), Bertrand Denzler (tenor sax), Jean-luc Guionnet (reeds), Jean-Sebastien Mariage (guitar), Edward Perraud (drums)

Hubbub as a project shares Mariage and Denzler in common with [Chamaeleo Vulgaris](#), a project which impressed with its mixture of dark and witty, rather rock-inflected free improv. Hubbub put aside the electronics which worked so well for Chamaeleo; instead the quartet plays together as a unit rather than forming a shifting pool of musicians for Mariage and Frederick Galiay to draw on.

Inevitably the results are closer to more familiar improv yardsticks, but this music still has a strongly atmospheric, very textural quality which immediately impresses. Broken into just two, half-hour segments, it presents neither focussed developments of single ideas nor quick-change scrabbling; instead these are drifting, slowly-evolving soundscapes. Although electronics aren't used, the aesthetic they helped realise in Chamaeleo is here again with Hubbub. Specific sounds are only intermittently attributable to particular musicians; instead, the ensemble blends extended techniques using an holistic strategy.

Of course, it often does happen that individual statements can be clearly attributed. Guionnet's Jaleika sounds like a double-reed and he plays long, keening notes on it; Denzler, although he uses a huge range of tactics, always sounds himself, enjoying the gruff wuffle of the tenor. Blondy's piano is a prepared one, as you might imagine, and it rings out only to dive back again into the percussive substrate which seems always to be around in this music -- credit of much of which must go, of course, to Perraud, who sounds a little like Roger Turner, a drummer of the very dramatic gesture and an eschewer of riffs. Mariage is comparable with Hans Tammen; he lacks the range of the latter, but he plays cleverly here and makes an indispensable contribution.

One's overall impression is, however, of the submission of individual egos to the greater aim of collective music-making. This is hugely successful, as it so often is in improvised music, and it feels rather odd, listening to this music, to refer to it was quintet improvisation at all. Improvisation it certainly is, and of an extremely good sort, ever-evolving but never feeling sketchy or out of ideas.

Richard Cochrane

Ivo Perelman: The Seven Energies of the Universe

([Leo Lab](#): CD309)

Ivo Perelman (tenor sax), Joseph Scianni (piano), Jay Rosen (drums)

Siwula/Cherry/Arnal: Badlands

([Cadence](#): CJR1120)

Blaise Siwula (alto sax), Vattel Cherry (bass), Jeff Arnal (drums)

Two energetic free jazz trios here; one led by Ivo Perelman, who is a bankable name despite not quite having had the big success that some of us hoped a couple of years ago ("the next David S Ware", some people said, but Ware had become far more accessible than Perelman, and anyway he hardly made it into the celebrity stratosphere afterwards). The other is led by Siwula, who's worked with Cecil Taylor along with his bass player on this session. Such things are a little misleading, however; the cult of celebrity, even in such a minority field as free jazz, tempts us to look at the leaders when a jazz trio is or should be a group undertaking, especially such hyperactive ones as these.

Siwula is that rara avis, a technically prodigious free jazz specialist who has genuinely studied and integrated some of the extended techniques beloved of European practitioners. Here he intersperses short but not throwaway solo tracks amidst the five (mainly substantial) trio performances. His range goes from straight jazz to the key-popping, reed-rasping effects more readily associated with the likes of John Butcher. He has the strong melodic sense one expects of an American jazzman, however, and the solos work because they tell little melodic stories from a broad palette. That may not sound sophisticated, but it certainly works.

The band swing like madmen. Cherry is absolutely in his element here, and Arnal batters his ride cymbal until, at the end, one suspects it would look as if it had been run over by trucks. Cherry's ability to weave melodic ideas in and out of the dense web of sound they create is a revelation, and his solo statements are eloquent and even, at times, rather magisterial. Above all, his sound is muscular and, unlike so many acoustic bassists in such roqdy company as this, he makes his presence felt as a equal partner in the business of making frantically inventive music happen.

As a result, this recording is an absolute joy. Its ability to create and manage astonishing complexity without ending up in cacophony is supernatural, and the capacity for the group to move into quieter but no less dynamic sections, whether to facilitate their own recovery or ours, is impressive too.

Perelman is another player with a taste for loud, demanding situations, and trio releases like "[The Eye Listens](#)" are easily comparable with the set above. This one, too, is quick and sometimes aggressive, but there is a subtlety here which was missing from "The Eye Listens" and which is most welcome in Perelman's work.

Perelman can, you see, be an exhaustingly confrontational player. He revels in the extreme high register, in punctuating his playing with screams or grinding, repetitive growls. He plays hard and loud, and expects his accompanists to keep up. This, however, is where Scianni and Rosen really show their quality. Both are perfectly capable of playing fast and loud, but that's not the hard part, as everybody knows; the hard part is playing fast and loud and co-operatively and with intelligence. It's what makes this music just about as hard as jazz gets; anyone can do it badly, but it's terribly, terribly hard to do well.

This is just what the rhythm section manage here. Scianni is a revelation, a player of lovely, rapturous things which explode into galaxies of notes at the slightest provocation. Rosen, like Scianni, plays everything pin-sharp, and the recording picks out every details of what they do. This is enormously refreshing compared with the way much free jazz gets recorded, and indeed played, and Perelman is to be thanked for his generosity in giving plenty of space to his collaborators.

Not that he's a shrinking violet, however. He is one of the few players on whom one can always rely to leap into a situation feet-first and furiously play all over it. And in such smart and responsive company, he is able to make plain the absolute lack of interest he has in emotive "screaming" or "roaring", and the entirely melodic ends to which such extraordinary energies are concentrated in his vocabulary. As his voice matures, Perelman is becoming more challenging, not less, and his presence as the grumpy, truculent old veteran of the future is much anticipated. This is the best thing this writer has heard from him for a while, and one of the best bands he's recorded with. Both disks are recommended to those who like their jazz hot, opinionated and clever, like a Tom Paulin Vindaloo.

Richard Cochrane

ICARUS -- Icarus (FMR: CD15-V1298)

Philipp Wachsmann (violin, electronics), Roger Curphy (double bass), Mark Wastell (cello), Carol Ann Jackson (voice), Trevor Taylor (percussion, electronics)

Old-fashioned free-improv is what this disk, on one level, is all about. The use of bowed strings has always been a part of free jazz and free improvisation, but it seems to have had something of a resurgence in the last ten years, with musicians seeking to get some of the sustained, complex textures which are available to both composers of orchestral works and those who work exclusively with electronics. The sound on this disk is very much dominated by the trio of bass, cello and violin, and it would be easy to imagine that this is "just another free session" and leave it at that.

Disregarding, for a moment, the wisdom of writing anything off as "just another free session", this disk does rather undermine some of those expectations. This is ensemble music, yes, and, yes, it's all improvised. Sure, it has as many connections with Pierre Boulez as with Albert Ayler and, yes, it contains a whole gamut, a veritable smorgasbord of extended techniques and non-standard timbres.

Yet it also does some things which many dates like this don't do. Most significantly, it develops its ideas very slowly. Not for Icarus that typically restless approach which tends to pick up ideas and then drop them for fear of appearing -- heaven forbid -- to be repeating oneself or stuck in a rut, with the result that the music runs all over the place expending energy but going nowhere. Icarus prefer to develop textures slowly; the local details may change by the second, but the music has an overall movement, a momentum which carries it forward. I think this is in part due to the relatively (and I say "relatively") straight playing which the string players engage in here. Wastell, in particular, is known for his textural approach, but here sets it somewhat aside the better to integrate into the group. Likewise, the electronics are used very sparingly, something like light playing on the surface of water, giving the music light and definition but never obtruding into its progress. Taylor's percussion is understated and effective, although his can't-play-will-play guitar on track four is something we could have managed without.

The star of the show is Carol Ann Jackson. Far from acting as a lead instrument, as Pete Stubley's sleeve notes point out, she is very much submerged in the ensemble, but the thread which she weaves through it is wholly distinctive and completely captivating. Her voice seems to be always there but never obtrusively so; a perfect balance of dynamic. It would be nice to hear her working with texts, but her non-verbal vocalisations are fully as musical as any of the other contributions here.

I mentioned Boulez, not Stockhausen or Cage, because Boulez is what this disk most calls to mind; atonal and post-serialist and all the rest, but also incurably Romantic. Icarus aren't interested in formal abstraction so much as ravishing sound, sweeping harmonies (there are sweeping harmonies, I promise you) and a lyrical melodic sensibility. There are even some jazzy moments, mostly thanks to Curphy's pizzicato approach which is the closest thing in this group to that tradition; his indebtedness to Charlie Haden, again something Stubley notes, is enormous, and all the muscular power and accuracy that goes with it is an enormous benefit to this group.

A great chill-out record, this, as well as a quiet, unassuming grower; at first listen it might seem a little hard to grasp, but that's because, like certain tidal waters, its slow-moving exterior hides a mercurial imagination.

Richard Cochrane

Gilbert Isbin: Solo Works

(Tonesetters: TS003)

Gilbert Isbin (guitar)

Isbin is a classical guitarist who performs his own compositions. If early influences from Paul Bley and Bill Evans imply an impressionistic, tonal player, however, nothing could be more inaccurate. Here are pieces full of extended techniques and preparations; Isbin's love of piano music has expanded to include Cecil Taylor and Marilyn Crispell in later years, and it certainly shows.

Isbin has a fiendishly powerful technique; he's able to play fast and loud without falling back on cliché. Working with preparations is easy enough when the style is soft and reflective, but in this energetic, quick-changing music it's almost impossibly difficult, especially in a solo setting. Derek Bailey is one virtuoso who famously expressed a lack of interest in preparations, finding them too unwieldy for his mercurial style; Isbin proves here that it can be done, that exciting and dynamic music can come from the most awkward of modifications.

These pieces can reach apoplectic levels of activity, as on the frenzied and ear-boggling "Ogle". Not everything on this disc has the same headlong rush to it, however, and it comes across as anything but hectoring. Tracks like "Toeka" and "Nuances" are more spacious, and the sequence of thirteen pieces, all fairly short, works as a satisfying whole. Indeed, the sheer variety on this disc can, at first, obscure the consistency of vision which these pieces share; the wild, hammering tachism, the Stepan Rak-like trilling arpeggios, the scrapes and rattles, the Cagean preparations, the percussive sounds, single-note lines and big, dramatic chording.

It's remarkable, then, that Isbin's style manages to remain coherent throughout. Where many classical guitar compositions have been plagued by gimmicky compendia of "new sounds", Isbin has gone far beyond that first flush of novelty, and his compositions work as more than just technical work-outs. In short, Isbin is one of the most enthralling avant-classicists around. He may be one step back from the edge of the envelope, but that just gives him the perspective to make his music as intelligent as it is. Highly recommended to all, and indispensable for guitarists and aficionados of the instrument.

Richard Cochrane

Iskra 1903: Chapter One, 1970-2

([Emanem](#): CDLR287)

Paul Rutherford (trombone, piano), Derek Bailey (guitar), Barry Guy (bass)

Parker/Guy/Lytton/Crispell: After Appleby

([Leo](#): CDLR283/284)

Evan Parker (saxophones), Barry Guy (bass), Paul Lytton (drums), Marilyn Crispell (piano)

Two releases by what one might refer to (without wishing to be indelicate) as veterans of the London improvised music scene, one new and one long-unavailable, both featuring the mighty Barry Guy in two extremely different settings.

Iskra 1903 was one of the legendary early improv groups, a trio of players who became, during its four-year existence, some of the biggest names in what was, and remains, a tiny but international scene. This triple-CD reissues two old Incus LPs which, if you have them, probably need replacing by now, and it packs in over an hour of previously unreleased material from the same period.

The two main incarnations of the group -- from 1970 and 1972 -- sound surprisingly different. The first disk finds the group at their inception, playing rather cool music in an edgy, aggressive manner. Bailey, in particular, plays his amplified acoustic with ferocious disregard to polite musical values, popping and rattling when one expects quietude. Having said all of which, this trio seems to love space above all, and although the three play with commitment and more than a little bite, the silence into which they propel their revolutionary sounds sets them off and makes the music simultaneously relaxed and uncomfortable.

The second disc finds the group two years later with a somewhat more finessed sound, but the dedication to raw acoustic impact within small sounds and big spaces remains unchanged. "Acoustic" because, as is often said of this kind of playing, one is made very much aware of the material presence of the instruments involved, although in fact both Bailey and Guy play amplified on these disks, with the former already deploying his influential but immediately identifiable volume pedal technique.

"After Appleby", on the other hand, is the latest release from Parker's occasional quartet -- actually his regular trio with Lytton and Guy, augmented by the never-disappointing Crispell. Parker fans will be strongly reminded of another Parker disk, "Time Will Tell", one of his most accessible and popular, which featured the same line-up with Paul Bley instead of Crispell.

There's the same limpid, almost ECM-esque sense of reserve in some of these pieces, particularly the first, on which the pianist sounds as if she might drift at any moment into a reading of "As Time Goes By". It's not all mellow free jazz, though; the following, extended track somewhat reprises Parker's duets with Eddie Prevost on "Most Material", Lytton skittering about the metal bits of his kit and Guy mimicking bowed cymbals or a stuttering floor tom.

All of which is to put things rather simplistically. As with any of Parker's more jazzy records, there's a vast amount of variety on these two CDs (one a studio session, the other live at the Vortex, London). For a start, the three big pieces (nearly 100 minutes of music in themselves) are interspersed with duets and a trio. That's a brave thing to do because it can lend a disjointed feel to a CD programme, but here it works well because it's clearly been carefully thought out.

Each of these non-quartet pieces is beautiful in itself, and all share a very similar musical approach, which means that during a casual listen one is not aware of shifting personnel so much as of a multi-levelled performance. In long, single-piece improvisations, it's common in any case for one or two musicians to sit out for a while; maybe this is, conceptually, just a development from that. There's a general sense of continuity between these pieces which gives them the feel of a continuous performance while the changes in line-up keep it varied on closer inspection (not that this quartet needs such a fillip, really, enthralling as they are).

Both releases are, in their own ways, inexhaustable sources of pleasure. The Iskra release is, one might argue, a matter of archive documentation, but this music sounds as brilliant and alive as ever and across three very full CDs the experience is never less than scintillating. What Parker's latest disk represents is something very different, the latest missive from a quartet which will doubtless be viewed as one of the classic jazz groups of its time. Snap them both up next pay day and regret nothing.

Richard Cochrane

IST: Anagrams to Avoid

(Siwa, SIWA #3)

IST: Consequences (of Time and Space)

(Confront, FRONT04)

Mark Wastell (cello), Rhodri Davies (harp), Simon H Fell (bass)

The Improvising String Trio is a group which sets out to explore extended techniques within the territory of the extreme avant garde classical tradition. The combination of harp, cello and bass may have been a matter of accident rather than design, but the concentration on acoustic stringed instruments lends both an unusual range and an enviable specificity to the group sound. They eschew fully notated pieces in favour of either indeterminate systems or completely free improvisation, largely because conventional notation has not a hope of capturing their individual vocabularies. In concert they can be heard performing aleatoric works specially commissioned for the group; here, the focus is on spontaneous group interaction.

Davies is probably the only player around making such extensive use of preparations on the harp; and he proves that such an approach can bear fruit in an improvising context. Wastell's cello is a source of some beautifully-controlled harmonic clusters, while Fell, who is rapidly becoming one of our most respected composers for improvisers as well as one of the finest British bass players of his generation, has a hundred ways to make a noise with his bass aside from actually playing notes. For much of the time, however, these noteworthy individual voices are surrendered to the greater cause of the group sound. All three are often immersed in an anonymous scratching-and-rattling which superficially implies that their instruments are under attack from hungry chickens, but which actually contains a wealth of detailed melodic and rhythmic information relating directly to its larger musical context.

Each piece seems to begin with one player's gesture, which it proceeds to explore, elaborate on and ultimately move beyond. The group cover the whole spectrum from near-silence to high-energy screaming, normally in a controlled but organic way. Although influenced by Cage's anything-can-happen philosophy, at their best they maintain a logic which holds the interest in a completely different way. That this is something which the group has fostered, knowingly or otherwise, is evident when comparing these two releases, which derive from sessions eighteen months apart.

Anagrams is a studio recording, and it succumbs occasionally to the kind of self-absorption avoided by Consequences, a more recent live document. If things aren't always so focussed on the earlier disk, though, the context allows much more delicacy to the players and much of it is extremely quiet (ist, apparently, is Welsh for hush). Nearly half of Anagrams is given over to Wastell and Fell in duet, which is fine but one does find oneself missing Davies' top end input. Consequences is the more approachable record, but Anagrams has its own qualities as the more abstract of the two. It is something of an achievement that the level of intensity of the group's playing has not in the least diminished in the period between these two recordings -- in fact, if anything, the added impetus of the live setting seems to have made the music even more hair-raising.

Richard Cochrane

IST -- Ghost Notes

([Bruce's Fingers](#): BF28)

Rhodri Davies (harp), Mark Wastell (cello), Simon H Fell (bass)

The Improvising String Trio's third album has at least one thing in its favour before the wrapper's even off: the CD format. Their music is extremely detailed, and previous releases on LP and cassette have captured only a percentage of what they do. Here, at last, is a full-blooded recording of their very full-blooded music.

This set combines the for which the trio are known with performances of specially-written compositions. These latter have been in their live repertoire for some time now, and it's good to hear them committed to disk at last. They are all "compositions for improvisers", and sceptics about that genre are invited to start here; while IST never sound like anything but IST, these compositions provide just enough material to give each piece a certain identity.

Regular visitors to Musings will be aware of Simon H Fell's apparent inability to produce anything less than top-quality music these days, and his two contributions here are thoughtful, well-played vehicles for improvisation which are no longer even in the same hemisphere as the themes-and-solos model. Meanwhile, Phil Durrant continues his rather ascetic exploration of sine tones, noise and glitches with a new version of Sowari. This writer played in an ensemble version of this piece during a workshop run by Durrant once, and while his explanation of the concept sounded slim the results were rather pleasant. In the hands of IST, "Sowari" sounds like a weird fusion of free improv and electronica. Fascinating stuff.

Elsewhere, Wastell contributes a piece focussing solely on percussive sounds, which again works in spite of how you imagine it's going to sound. Stace Constantinou's "Empedocles" unites the two extremes of post-serial modernism -- stochasticism and aleatorics -- to create something which this listener has already fallen in love with, while Guto Puw's "X-Ist" is a mainly graphic score which inspires some beautiful playing from all three performers. Listening to this piece, one is particularly aware that, despite the strong avant garde heritage in this group, they rarely play extremely abrasive music for long. While many free improv groups saw away at their instruments striving to be "difficult", IST seem to be genuinely trying to make their extremely intricate music communicate as clearly as possible. The last composition is Bergstrom-Nielsen's "Fire Music", a score which fits on the back of a matchbox but yields two and a half minutes of arresting music and could have provided quite a bit more.

The completely "free" improvisations are all spontaneous, sparky affairs full of fluid movements and plenty of crosstalk between these regular collaborators. Fell has been an important figure in British free jazz/experimental music for a while now, and Davies and Wastell look to be inexorably rising to meet him. The trio they form is unique and uncompromising; this is both their most accomplished and their most accessible recording to date.

Richard Cochrane

Italian Instabile Orchestra -- Italian Instabile Festival

(Leo: CDLR262/263)

Carlo Actis Dato (reeds), Luca Calabrese (trumpet), Daniele Cavallanti (reeds), Eugenio Colombo (reeds), Paolo Daamiani (cello, bass), Renato Geremia (various), Martin Mayes (French horn), Guido Carlo Actis Dato (reeds), Luca Calabrese (trumpet), Daniele Cavallanti (reeds), Eugenio Colombo (reeds), Paolo Daamiani (cello, bass), Renato Geremia (various), Martin Mayes (French horn), Guido Carlo Actis Dato (reeds), Luca Calabrese (trumpet), Daniele Cavallanti (reeds), Eugenio Colombo (reeds), Paolo Daamiani (cello, bass), Renato Geremia (various), Martin Mayes (French horn), Guido Carlo Actis Dato (reeds), Luca Calabrese (trumpet), Daniele Cavallanti (reeds), Eugenio Colombo (reeds), Paolo Daamiani (cello, bass), Renato Geremia (various), Martin Mayes (French horn), Guido~8

Forget the old schtick about the Italian Instabile Orchestra being the most important big jazz band in Italy. They're one of the most important, full stop, even if, by sheer geo-political misfortune, they are also horribly underrated outside their native country. They're captured here at a festival organised in their honour, in a range of different groupings from full orchestra down to a couple of solo spots.

The small groupings are surprisingly varied. Some are jazzy and even quite Romantic, as in the two duets involving pianist Geremia. These, devoid of chord changes as they are, are closer to the cool jazz experiments with freedom than the energy music for which this group of musicians has come to be more notorious. Other groups do, however, move into more conventionally "free improv" ground, and do so very successfully, notably a brass quintet which promises knotty, abstract music which it duly delivers.

The orchestral tracks are hot jazz workouts with a hint of Mingus and a dash of Gil Evans. While the head arrangements are often rumbustious, harmonically complex affairs, the group then normally breaks down to provide a less structured basis for the freewheeling solos which predominate. Of course, players like Pino Minafra and Carlo Actis Dato rise to the occasion as expected, but players who are less-known, at least here in the UK, also acquit themselves extremely well.

Given that this is a live recording of one of the most raucous acts around, the sound quality is immaculate. Only on the final track does the sheer volume get the better of the recording equipment so that it ends up sounding like a bootleg of Dizzy Gillespie's big band -- not in itself a bad thing, naturally. Packaged with a generous booklet full of articles, reviews and pictures, this double-CD set is an excellent document as well as a hugely enjoyable listen.

Richard Cochrane

Ivanovich: Solo Guitar

(Amish Records: ami011)

Chuck Johnson (guitars)

Paolo Angeli: Linee di Fuga

([PJP/Erosha](#): PJP002/ERH012)

Paolo Angeli (guitar)

Solo guitar records seem to come out with alarming frequency these days. They have a markedly different flavour from solo saxophone records (so common in improvised music) or solo piano ones, the mainstay of the classical world.

Johnson's offering (oddly released under the name "Ivanovich") comes from the improv end of the spectrum, with a definite rock influence. The nineteen tracks here are all very different, employing a range of techniques familiar to any avant guitarist: drumming on the strings, scraping, seeking out extreme harmonics, making percussive sounds and so on. Some tracks, such as the opening couple, feature just one technique and explore it in some depth.

The truth is that these pieces don't really make much impact. We've all heard these sounds before, and Johnson does little to string them together into musical structures. Indeed, it seems almost perverse for him to focus so closely on technique when he's not really a technically gifted player. His performance is often rather sloppy, leading to unexpected pings or dead notes where they were surely unintended (or at least where they make no musical sense).

This lack of virtuosity shouldn't be off-putting, however. Johnson has bags of energy, which he employs in the straighter tracks like "z.h.r.", a clawhammer-picked piece which wavers between country-rock and weightless abstraction. He also has a likably swaggering delivery on "curved air", ostensibly a violin bow showcase but actually an incomprehensible anecdote-without-words which weaves drunkenly around a limited range to great effect.

Johnson is definitely better on electric guitar than acoustic, and what he lacks in technical wizardry he more than makes up for with attitude and timing. This is a pretty enjoyable disc, but probably not Johnson's best format. Perhaps he's something like Marc Ribot: great in bands, less good solo. This is patchy but very appetite-whetting stuff.

Paolo Angeli, on the other hand, seems to be come from a classical background. "Linee di Fuga" is a very different-sounding record from Johnson's, although many of the same things are going on. One difference is Angeli's choice of instrument, the Sardinian guitar, which is a folk variation on the Spanish guitar and which Angeli further varies by means of preparations, extended techniques and a massive rack of effects.

It's astonishing that there are no overdubs here; Angeli's technique is of the nylon-pumping, macho speed-freak kind, and he makes several things happen at once with that atavistic attraction to difficulty for its own sake which guitarists seem stricken by. He sounds like an atonal, grating Adrian Legg.

One problem with all this is that Angeli seems to have an uncertain grasp on how to make sense of a stretch of musical time. He switches from one astonishing gymnastic display to another with little real logic. Yes, it's extremely impressive, but pieces like the title track, which switches arbitrarily between punchy straight picking and bowed orchestra-isms, can be extremely frustrating as well.

The switches in this piece, incidentally, are studio edits, not live transitions (which would surely prove impossible even for Angeli). The CD documents a mixture of improvisations and compositions (including two traditional pieces) and a combination of live playing and studio work.

Like Johnson, Angeli is probably at his most effective and at his most comfortable when he abandons the necessity to show off "new" sounds and just plays relatively straight. Then he sounds a little like Robert Fripp, mixing a strong rhythmic pulse with jagged, semi-tonal lines. Indeed, pieces like "Piano a Denti Stretti" could easily be vintage King Crimson compositions.

Looked at pessimistically, this is a failed semi-classical guitar record with dreadfully misjudged avant pretensions. But looked at another way, it's a pretty satisfying prog rock disc; there are a lot of much, much, much worse virtuosic guitar albums out there and this one will give you hours of pleasure if this kind of thing is your bag. Fripp fans are encouraged to seek it out and not be put off by the title track; others approach with more caution.

Chris Jonas: The Sun Spits Cherries

(Hopscotch: Hop4)

Chris Jonas (soprano sax), Joe Fiedler (tenor trombone), Chris Washburne (bass trombone), Andrew Barker (percussion)

Soprano sax, two trombones and percussion; some odd instrumental combinations are born of necessity, others by design. This seems to be a case of the latter, with Jonas writing punchy, rhythmic structures which take advantage of and, to some extent, smoothe out this strange line-up.

The leader's compositions dispense with head-solos-head arrangements and instead use fragmented sections which are interspersed with solos. He runs a full gamut of textural possibilities, from the opening horn stabs right through thick chording to atonal wails. His compositions often take unexpected right-turns, the quartet dropping into some composed passage which bears only a tangential relation to what's gone before.

There are, however, no po-mo genre pastiches here. Jonas's style is very much an intersection of the jazz and classical traditions, with results which can be surprisingly reminiscent of Stravinsky. This is Stravinsky without the tunes, however, and if these pieces use harmonic structures then the soloists certainly ignore them or relate to them only tangentially. Fiedler and Washburne both make very convincing contributions, sometimes squarking and blaring, following a more conventional line at others.

Jonas is a pretty cool soloist too, preferring the mercurial flow of Braxton to textural or pseudo-emotional outbursts. Sometimes his playing sounds merely facilitous, but not too frequently: more often, what seemed at first like noodling turns out to have a firm purpose. This makes him an impressive and unusual player in the free jazz world, what with so much emphasis placed these days on high-octane energy music revivalists.

This record documents some fascinating compositional work from Jonas, and some great ensemble playing from all concerned. It'll be a little chilly for some tastes, no doubt, but there are plenty of unexpected angles and weird departures here for those willing to give it a listen. More like classical music than jazz, it's really a project in what used to be called the Third Stream. Well worth checking out.

Richard Cochrane

Kahn, Jason: Drums and Metals

([Cut](#): CUT003)

Jason Kahn (percussion)

Sabatini, Mirko: -28+Alieni

([Ambiances Magnetiques](#): AM080CD)

Jason Kahn (percussion)

Solo percussion records have long been considered the very apotheosis of masturbatory, self-congratulatory nonsense which musicians sometimes go in for rather too much for most listeners' linkings. We will happily, unquestioningly buy solo albums by pianists, guitarists, even saxophonists, but what can a drummer do for an hour, alone, except show off their chops? Needless to say, such talk is terribly unfair, and percussion has come on a long way, at least in avant circles.

Take Mike Sabatini, who plays not only drums but also "motors, plates, springs [and] rubber bands". These additions, plus liberal application of a bow, give him access to the world of sustained sounds from which conventional drummers are largely excluded. Yet this is no lazy drone workout, and Sabatini gets serious about percussion, too, playing in a scattershot style with what sound like two or three pulses layered together, between which he skips rather gracefully.

As one might expect, there's much here to remind the listener of Eddie Prevost, but that influence (if such it was) isn't overpowering. Sabatini is somehow a brasher player who uses big sonic gestures to get where he wants to go, but there's plenty of space in his sound for some lovely subtleties too. This is music of assured technical poise, perhaps a little too much so for some listeners, but it's exciting stuff too, and packing eighteen tracks into forty-six minutes means that nothing outstays its welcome.

Jason Kahn has also turned in a rather short album -- something we're very much in favour of here, what with so many labels choosing to spoil half an hour's worth of good music with another half hour of dull padding -- but these forty minutes pack a very different kind of punch. Where Sabatini is clearly coming from the free jazz end of the improv spectrum, Kahn here sounds like a classic minimalist, playing with discipline rather than verve.

The music here seems most interested in exploring apparently simple pulsations, mostly at a fast tempo, utilising a more or less restricted range of timbres. Kahn does play very evenly, but whereas these tracks might be dull as electronic music they come sparkling to life as the unavoidable variations in sound and phrasing emerge. Like a Mondrian painting seen in the flesh, one isn't impressed by the perfections so much as the irregularities, the rich variety rather than the uniform gloss. That makes this music enormously appealing, despite its simple content; track six, played only on hi-hat cymbals, draws a shifting, whirling palette of colours from the drummer's emanuensis, calling to mind, of all people, the mighty Max Roach.

Brave things to release, then, solo percussion albums. Few people like them enough to seek them out specifically, and often they're seen as a musician's calling-card and little more. Both of these present releases, however, are full of intelligence and altogether devoid of the nightmarish riffing which so often characterises the drum solo. One suspects they won't sell too many of these, but those who pick them up will be glad they did.

Richard Cochrane

Jeff Kaiser & Ernesto Diaz-Infante: Pith Balls and Inclined Planes

([Pfundmentum](#): CD005)

Jeff Kaiser (trumpet, flugelhorn, electronics, voice), Ernesto Diaz-Infante (guitar, voice)

Jeff Kaiser samples and manipulates his own trumpet and Diaz-Infante's impressive guitar to create stunning, very contemporary music at the very outer edge of acid jazz. No, it isn't entirely jazzy, and you assuredly can't dance to it, but the electronic ambiance, coupled with Kaiser's fragile melodies, lend it a certain funky swing which isn't obvious straight off but which catches up with you after a while.

Take "The unreasonable power of the diagrams"; Kaiser's flugelhorn comes on like he's taking a solo in Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers, while Diaz-Infante's percussive playing gives the whole thing a kind of unpulsed undulation, the kind of swing which improvised music really thrives on. On "My machines came from too far away", Kaiser sounds like and Diaz-Infante just goes wild; wonderfully exciting stuff.

There are exceptions: "Once (and it was not yesterday)" is dedicated to Nancarrow and, like all things dedicated to Nancarrow, it collages accelerated piano samples (from Diaz-Infante's excellent *Solus*) in imitation of the dedicatee's piano-rolls. A slower middle section is all too brief (how brave it would have been to do the whole piece like this) but the whole is satisfying enough. On the other hand, "Puny demigods on stilts" and "Outside, three tennis courts" sound like live duo improvisations, and whether it is or not, they're lovely pieces of music, especially the former.

Kaiser has both a strong voice as a musician and a strong musical conception, two things which don't always come together. Finding Diaz-Infante to work with must have been a pleasure, as his guitar-playing is full of verve and always surprising. Here, it's almost entirely percussive -- knocking on the wood, striking the strings with drumsticks and so on -- but there's a real personality here, and a proper guitarist lurks audibly within. Recommended.

Richard Cochrane

Natraj: Deccan Dance

(Galloping Goat: GGCD-3424)

Phil Scarff (saxophones), Mat Maneri (electric violin), Michael Rivard (bass), Jerry Leake (percussion), Bertram Lehmann (percussion)

Kang/van derSchyff/Houle: Pieces of Time

([Spool](#): SPL104)

Eyvind Kang (violin), Francois Houle (clarinet), Dylan van der Schyff (drums)

The African influence on jazz -- indeed, many would argue, the African origins of jazz -- made a deep impression on the originators of free music, but to the European avant garde this attachment looked hokey at best and fetishistic at worst; and since the early seventies, few have looked into it much. Here are two groups who, in radically different ways, seem to have dusted it off for a second look.

Natraj take the more conventional route, offering eight heads-and-solos affairs which cook up both Indian and African methods with fairly straight contemporary jazz. The results have a rather shiny feel which might put some listeners off -- Scarff can sound very much like Andy Sheppard -- but the joys of hearing Maneri in such an un-Maneri setting are worthy of the effort. He's evidently been influenced by Hindustani violin and santoor music, and his well-honed feel for microtones serves him well. Like Elliott Sharp in *The President*, he is a joyously anarchic presence in otherwise rather mainstream surroundings.

Those who aren't scared off by tunes and foot-tapping rhythms will like this record a lot. Scarff isn't the most involving player in the world, but he does a good job, and at his best he's more reminiscent of Wayne Shorter than of Sheppard. On occasion, as on "Na Yella Bo", he can find the thread of an argument and chase it down like a bloodhound, making pretty compelling listening. His style makes a good contrast with Maneri, whose playing is more thematic here than usual, but not that much more.

A word for the two percussionists (Lehmann is at the trap set most of the session), too: they're accomplished enough that the co-opting of such different strategies as West African drumming, Karnatic tabla and jazz kit drumming don't sound too much like ethnic tourism. If purists will complain that Leake's tabla isn't in tune on "Raga Bihag", that rather misses the point: this is an exercise in fusion, not purism, and if the purists are offended then so be it.

Natraj's brand of fusion is pretty cohesive and the results are polished and professional. What Kang's trio does is very different. Its surface is prickly and unwelcoming, dominated by pizzicato scrabbling, galloping percussion figures and the most abstract of Houle's many moods; there's no jazz at all on this session. At first glance, then, it seems to be chamber improv, just old-fashioned chamber improv, that's all, and nothing to pay too much attention to.

All of which makes it surprising to find that the group seem to submerge into these improvisations references to African and Indian melodies. Now, there are few things worse than chamber improv groups which, not having the courage of their convictions, decide to scatter in some more accessible moments to keep the crowd happy. But this isn't that; the African feel goes all the way down, down through the SME-like trio work, down through the 60s avant textures and the bedrock of make-it-new modernism.

It's hard to explain exactly how this works, but the presence of the melodic material seems seamlessly wedded to the surrounding music and to the group's overall MO. Suddenly, Kang's fiddle sounds like an mbira, Houle's clarinet like a wooden flute (in fact, this writer suspects that he's playing a flute of some sort on track two, although he's credited only on clarinet). Kang works with Bill Frisell these days, and Houle has played folk-influenced jazz many times before; this trio has a synergy which goes beyond any nonsense about "telepathic communication": they actually share common musical strategies.

There are probably not too many people who will find these CDs equally to their liking. Both are fine records. Natraj present a not-too-challenging but very enjoyable take on Indo-Afro-Jazz fusion, and their melodic and rhythmic drive is pretty irresistible. What Kang, Houle and van der Schyff are up to is more profound, if less immediately accessible. Spool are a label well worth checking out, and this release is an extremely impressive one.

Richard Cochrane

Pandelis Karayorgis: Heart and Sack

([Leo Lab](#): CD048)

Pandelis Karayorgis (piano), Nate McBride (bass), Randy Peterson (drums)

Karayorgis sounds like one of those players so bloody-mindedly focussed on his own concept that accompanists had better fall in line or seek work elsewhere. There's nothing wrong with this -- the same could be said of Cecil Taylor, for instance -- and he is an elegant player, but his harmonic and rhythmic approaches are so downright weird as to severely test his fellow musicians' instincts.

What makes things worse for them is that as soon as, say, Peterson picks up what he's doing and starts to follow, Karayorgis seems to take this as a cue to make a sideways leap and play something at right-angles to what preceded it, leaving the poor drummer to hammer home an accent which is no longer there. That Karayorgis does this on purpose seems undeniable, simply because he pursues this policy so consistently throughout this disk. It seems that he enjoys the tension, the xenochronous effect of piano and rhythm section moving in and out of phase. This is a disconcerting strategy at first, but eventually it starts to make some sense.

Nate McBride has something else to contend with: Karayorgis' harmonic ideosyncrasies. Like all the best pianists who thrive on dissonance -- Taylor, Crispell, Bergman, Riley and the rest -- he miraculously has his own sound, harmonic strategies which seem to belong to him. Nevertheless, while it is easy enough for the listener to begin to feel at home with these ideas, it is much less so for a musician to develop a successful response to them in improvisation. This is why McBride, a fine player who takes some strong solos, is reduced to walking most of the time, or to fairly minimal contributions. It's a successful solution, inasmuch as the result is an agreeable sound, but one cannot help the feeling that the only approach to Karayorgis' bulldozer may be just this: to keep out of the way.

The impression of the pianist as domineering may not be helped by the quality of the recording, which is not unlike having your head shoved under the piano lid. In fact, his playing is sensitive and extremely well thought-out, and John Corbett is right in his sleeve notes to call this a work of subtle understatement, although paradoxically it's a rather loud one with a lot of notes in it. Listening to Heart and Sack has much of the same pleasure to it as listening to Monk. One strains to follow his ideas as they constantly shift direction, smiling with what is a rare privilege these days, the privilege of not being talked down to.

Richard Cochrane

Aki Takase: Le Cahier du Bal

([Leo](#): CDLR319)

Aki Takase (piano)

Howard Riley Trio: Overground

([Emanem](#): 4054)

Howard Riley (piano), Barry Guy (bass), Tony Oxley (percussion, electronics)

Pandelis Karayorgis Trio: Blood Ballad

([Leo](#): CDLR325)

Pandelis Karayorgis (piano), Nate McBride (bass), Randy Peterson (drums)

Christine Wodrascka & Ramon Lopez: Aux Portes du Matin

([Leo](#): CDLR318)

Christine Wodrascka (piano), Ramon Lopez (drums)

Takase, Karayorgis and Wodrascka are all firm-handed pianists who take jazz seriously. The first two owe something to Monk -- who doesn't? -- but their languages are quite different despite some superficial similarities; Wodrascka is more distant from the jazz tradition, but this is still very much jazz music rather than something else. Riley is, of course, an established player with an international reputation; while comparisons with the younger players are unfair, there's clearly some common ground here among them all.

Takase is all over the keyboard; she has more Cecil Taylor in her playing than first appears. There are none of the great galloping chromatic runs which pianists employ so liberally these days, however, and it's the older man's sense of jazz harmony which seems to have made an impact on Takase.

The fifteen improvisations here are freewheeling and rather wild for the most part, but the complete confidence of touch which powers them along is wedded to a cunning thematic approach to developing material and one never feels that the music is slipping away from her.

There's a lot of functional harmony here, and much more exposed than you'd usually find in Taylor's playing. "Tango de Anzu", an exquisite exercise in dramatic staccato, even moves through a succession of tonal centres. But it's never reduced to changes or lazy cadences; Takase does a continuous high-wire act and never falls into the safety net. This is hugely impressive stuff, and we had better hear more from Takase in the future; she must have a mind like a bacon-slicer to play such intelligent, structured music on the fly. Unconditionally recommended.

Pandelis Karayorgis is a no less smart player. His clever uses of dissonance impressed in [Heart and Sack](#) and continue to do so here. Inspired by the Strayhorn/Ellington book, and covering a Coltrane tune, he's in even more mainstream jazz territory here than he was on his previous release, and this is music which many who find most of Leo's catalogue a little intimidating will be able to get along with grandly.

That's certainly not to say it's a lightweight set, however. Karayorgis is a pianist not to be underestimated; his fractured, Monk-like logic is absolutely right and the uneasy conjunction of rather sentimental hard bop with jagged angles is constantly arresting. He seems to think his way through each solo, making weird but valid deductions from the basic harmonic scheme. Indeed, the extent of such a scheme or the degree of composition is not clear, because the trio's playing is sure-footed but oblique throughout.

As for McBride and Peterson, they mainly hold back and provide support for the pianist -- a welcome improvement over the loud "Heart and Sack" set, which sounds ragged by comparison. Both are consummately tasteful, and although their contributions are essential they're appropriately understated. The focus here is on Karayorgis, and anyone who enjoys jazz piano would be wise to hear what he has to say.

Christine Wodrascka is far more "abstract" than Takase or Karayorgis; she's also the youngest and least well-known. Like Takase, her modus operandi is thematic development, but here the themes are deceptively simple blocks of sound, and she's as interested in their rhythmic as harmonic characteristics.

her duet with Lopez is dynamic and chromatic, impetuous and, in one sense anyway, not terribly subtle. But Wodrascka's music isn't about subtlety, or not really anyway, and her rhythmic dynamism is what keeps you listening to these very involving performances. She's at her best when tackling her rugged lumps of material -- big dissonant chords which tremble and hammer under her fingers -- rather than quietly ruminating on the strings (as she does on one piece) or preparing the instrument. This latter is quite a mess, although an undoubtedly enjoyable one as objects ping off the strings and bounce around. That seems to be a big part of

her aesthetic, and one imagines that Lopez, who likes this sort of thing, is having a ball.

Still, there's a definite jazziness at the heart of this music. Lopez, although far from a traditional free bop man, plays with a lazy swing for a gopod portion of this music, something over which both his and his partner's big, dramatic gestures can sit. The pair work together beautifully, and although the music here is somewhat mixed the high points are very, very impressive.

British veteran Howard Riley has things in common with all of these players -- Takase's thematic cunning, Karayorgis's obliquity, Wodrascka's thunder -- but, of course, in a rather different package. Riley is, unlike any of these three, entirely divorced from functional harmony, and his approach to rhythm is, as the cliché has it, angular. Actually, the cliché has something to recommend it; Riley really does sound as if he's navigating absurdly frequent hairpin bends at the keyboard, and hardly has he begun to state an idea, it seems, then he's driven it with what appears to be wild abandon in the opposite direction.

It's a pleasure to hear Riley in good company, and we're fortunate that his taste in musicians has always been pretty good. Rarely have such heights as these been obtained, however; the trio with Oxley and Guy sounds like it's going to be pure perfection, and it is. The bassist is infinitely flexible, and here his arco sings, growls, grizzles, punctuates and percusses, always in synch with Riley and often pushing him, with a split-second manoeuvre, into one of those handbrake-turns which so characterise this music. The bassist in a piano trio can sometimes feel like a spare wheel, but never here; Guy is proactive, Riley is constantly interested, and both listen with enviable acuity.

Oxley's musicianship is, like that of the other two, legendary. He's just the sort of thing Riley needs, a player, like Guy, which is unintimidated and full of ideas. His main mode is a very busy rush of sound, but within that is a forest of detail. He has plenty more percussive techniques than this, of course, but the music here being often blustering and highly energetic, this approach is often in evidence.

Oxley also uses electronics here to augment the trio sound. Sometimes this approach can be pretty nasty, as irrelevant bleeps and squarks leap out of an otherwise acoustic setting. Oxley, however, is cleverer than this, and the sounds he employs are close to the sounds of the trio, so that even a close listen can have you mystified as to which instrument you're hearing, especially as all three use amplification and stomp-box effects from time to time. There's absolutely nothing intrusive about any of this, and the Oxley-Riley duet "Pages", where the electronics are at their most obvious, sounds remarkably like the trio usually does, with the extended techniques which are widely in evidence augmented by electronics. The piece, and the remainder of the music here, is utterly absorbing and ravishingly lovely. Recommended without hesitation.

Richard Cochrane

Delbecq, Benoit: Pursuit

([Songlines](#): SGL11529-2)

Benoit Delbecq (piano), Francois Houle (clarinet), Michael Moore (reeds), Jean-Jacques Avenel (bass), Steve Arguelles (drums, electronics), Marc Ducret (guitar, one track only)

Petit, Didier: NOHC on the Road

([Leo Records](#): CD065)

Daunik Lazro (saxophones), Denis Colin (bass clarinet), Michael Nick (violin), Didier Petit (cello, voice)

Kaufmann, Achim: Double Exposure

([Leo Records](#): CDLR289)

Michael Moore (reeds), John Schroder (guitar), John Hollenbeck (drums), Achim Kaufmann (piano)

People will, it seems, continue to insist that jazz isn't dead for some time to come, and as long as they make music as good as this, who can complain? These three records are all firmly within the jazz tradition; rather than fusing it with something else, they all, in different ways, aim to develop interesting little ideas buried deep within it.

Take Kaufmann's quartet, part of what appears to be a recent rediscovery of cool jazz, with its pools of languid sound and its clever, by no means atonal but often rather weird-sounding harmonies. There's much here that jazz fans will have heard before, but much to enjoy, too. The compositions are a bit of a weak link -- they're plagued by bebop cliches and rather clunky avantgardisms -- but the quartet are a strong improvising unit and the solo sections are easy to like.

Kaufmann's piano is a surprisingly forceful presence on these tracks, picking out notes with a strength which belies the relative repose of much of the music. His solos seem to abandon any chord structures pretty quickly, discovering his own little harmonic niches and keeping bassist Schroder on his toes in the process. Moore has a preference for meditative playing, as on the final "Sphericals", where he leads the clarinet into an almost whimsical pastorate. He can do up-beat, but when he does it's a more bluesy, boppish figure he cuts; his solo on "Double Exposure" could almost have come from Charlie Mariano or any other of a legion of top-drawer Blakey or Mingus sidemen. In other words, it's good stuff, but it's a little surprising to hear someone playing that way in this day and age.

And that's a question-mark which hangs over this whole session, and many others like it. If it had been recorded in 1960, it would be considered prescient, daring and terribly exciting. In 2000, it sounds just a little retro. There are good things here -- Kaufmann's playing is most of them, actually, but Moore has a lovely take on that sweet-sour Giuffre sound which is also worth catching -- but it's the ballads which really work and the up-tempo numbers like "Pea Head" and the title track are, really, just bland modal jazz-funk which Schroder livens up somewhat but which are otherwise entirely forgettable. A shame, because there's much to be impressed by here when the tempo cools down.

Moore also appears as a member of Delbecq's quintet, and the music here, although in some ways coming from similar roots, is altogether different. Delbecq is a pianist who will already be known to many readers, as will clarinetist Houle (with whom Moore shares a lot of common ground); this group has the muscular sophistication which Kaufmann's quartet sometimes lacks.

One thing which is immediately striking is that, while this is free jazz with the see-saw rhythm most often associated with Cecil Taylor's small-group work, there's a very up-front contemporary angle supplied by Steve Arguelles's electronics. No shy background noises or occasional percussive samples here -- the swoop of them fills some of the best moments here, transforming a fairly old-fashioned kind of playing into something quite original.

The compositions here fall prey to standard jazz patterns at times, just as Kaufmann's do. One wonders whether this is deliberate -- a way to make the music more accessible by framing it with something familiar -- or whether composing well these days is just so hard that most people tend to turn in indifferent efforts. As with the Kaufmann disk, then, this is one where the solo or ensemble improvisations tend to be more impressive than the heads. Indeed, and in common with many projects like this, it's often the comping which is most impressive, with Avenel, Arguelles and Delbecq often more interesting than what Houle (a player of real daring and imagination) or Moore play on top of them.

Delbecq is not a pianist to dismiss, whatever you make of his rather watery compositions here: his is a genuinely elegant reappraisal of the last forty years of free jazz piano. It would be good to hear him in more challenging settings than this one, where he is, after all, playing his own compositions, mostly in the company of familiar friends. The first track of "Pursuit" makes a tantalising promise which the rest of the record doesn't really fulfil; it's complicated, flowing, uneasy. There isn't enough of this sort of thing here, but what there is is excellent stuff.

Didier Petit offers a taste of it in the outstanding *NOHC on the Road*. The least jazzy of the three disks considered here, it still has close connections to the tradition, but it also takes account of European-style free improv. The line-up is unconventional, too -- two reeds, two strings -- and it's to their credit that such logical, intelligent music comes out of what could have been a very ordinary impro-jam.

While this, perhaps inevitably, has connections with Eastern European music (Nick's ecstatic violin) and the Classical avant garde, the real progenitor here is Ayler, and it's always nice to see Ayler's legacy re-emerging in peculiar ways. Here it's the soaring folk music he played to incomprehending audiences of beatniks to which NOHC pays tribute, particularly in the opening track, "The Progressive Slide into Pleasure", a track which makes you slowly stand up as you listen to it, like an auditory Alexander technique.

Lazro plays more jazz licks than his companions, and that actually helps here, in this otherwise rather distant offspring of the music. "The Missing Mass", for instance, has him intoning not unlike Ornette Coleman playing with strings, an almost bell-like tolling of phraseology which grounds the funereal movement beneath. Funeral march and pentecostal ecstasy: these are the two poles of this album, as they were for Ayler's music. Exciting, at times spine-tingling stuff. Highly recommended.

Richard Cochrane

Greg Kelley: Trumpet

(Meniscus: MNSCS009)

Greg Kelley (trumpet)

Dorner/Lonberg-Holm/Zerang: Claque

(Meniscus: MNSCS006)

Axel Dorner (trumpet), Fred Lonberg-Holm (cello), Michael Zerang (percussion, tubaphone)

Two releases from extremely talented trumpeters and the extreme edge of their instrument's development, if we can still talk in such terms any more. Yet, skeptically postmodern as we are these days, new voices do emerge, with fresh sounds and innovative techniques, however much we may think such things ceased a certain number of decades ago.

Greg Kelley is a fantastic player, a maker of music which is alarming, frightening, funny and endearing at one and the same time. There's nothing cute or nostalgic in this collection of mainly brief solos, most of which seem to be played on modified trumpets and/or in strange acoustic environments. The very extreme nature of this music -- which rarely sounds anything like trumpet-playing of any sort, avant garde or otherwise -- is its strength, and Kelley does not balk at giving you what feels like a whole new sound-world.

As is often the way with records like this, most of the pieces are dominated by a particular sound or technique which is explored to create the music. The often brutalist effects are heightened by the music's static qualities and the tendency of pieces to end on a cut, as if the tape was simply switched off. Yet the pieces using breath sounds, particularly the unnamed eighth track, and oddly beautiful, and throughout this CD Kelley gives a virtuoso performance of focussed, determined, controlled music-making backed by a very brave, no-compromise aesthetic. Utterly brilliant.

Axel Dorner is also a trumpeter who plays around the edges of his instrument. Although not such an extremist as Kelley, his focus on breath and mouth sounds -- often seeming to view the trumpet more as an amplifier than an instrument in itself -- makes for a demanding and highly creative soundworld.

This trio set is fairly traditional in format, presenting medium-length acoustic improvisations with the cello and drums fitting quite as you might expect into this quite stratified music. Each of the three players is easy to pick out from the others (not such a common thing in music like this) and their interaction is a matter of action at a distance rather than mutual imitation.

This makes for a set of intelligent, stimulating pieces which are pleasing to listen to. Not as challenging as Kelley, perhaps, but certainly more accessible (a word they may not have expected to see in their press, but there it is). Those who enjoy concentrated small-group improv between clever participants would do well to check this out.

Richard Cochrane

Kenne/Brennan: Pipelines

([Leo Records](#): CDLR292)

Hans Kennel (trumpet, alphorn), John Wolf Brennan (pipe organ), Marc Unternahrer (tuba)

Diaz-Infante, Ernesto: Solus

(Pax Recordings: PR90250)

Ernesto Diaz-Infante (piano)

Ernesto Diaz-Infante is a pianist and guitarist of remarkably catholic tastes. Last year he released a fearsomely noisy electric guitar record and a quiet, Feldman-inspired set of piano pieces. Here he's back with the piano, but the mood is much more restless and the overall feel far more technically assured.

Superficially, there's a common note here with Howard Riley, in that this music has a rolling rhythm which is driven by distorted, elasticated boogie-woogie bass lines topped by zingy dissonances. But the difference is that this isn't really very jazzy music; it sounds far more indebted to classicism, and the cool breeze of Diaz-Infante's previous disk blows through this session, too. There may be many ragtime strategies in this music, but they're borrowed and translated just like Tatum translated classical music into jazz.

Harmonically there are some very clever things going on here -- Diaz-Infante has either a cunning ear or some kind of theoretical thing going on, as many of these pieces make perfect sense in terms of functional harmony, another oddly classical concept which is a million miles away from the free jazz this resembles on the surface. Just one complaint: there are thirteen tracks here, all of moderate length, and it would have been nice to hear how these ideas would work over a longer time-scale.

John Wolf Brennan is also a pianist known for his eclecticism, and here he has translated himself onto a church organ for the purposes of playing something somewhere in between baroque music and jazz. Kennel is the perfect partner in such a project; his trumpet is brilliant and bright, sharp and clear, just as it should be for this music of fanfares. Eschewing strong dissonances, this duo instead reach for harmonic nuances and the sound of a big baroque church celebration transported en masse into the twenty-first century.

They're joined by Unternahrer's tuba for just four tracks, and his uneasy parp pushes them into slightly edgier waters. This is music you really have to listen to: it creates an aura of pleasing-enough sound, and that's all you hear if it's on in the background. Only close-up do their cleverly intertwined lines really emerge. What's more, the very weirdness of this project can overpower the music the first time you hear it. But there's real musical intelligence under that it's-better-than-it-sounds exterior.

Brennan and Kennel have managed to take a powerfully classical paradigm and inject, rather gently, some elements of jazz into it, creating an improvised music of some complexity out of an unpromising culture clash. In a quite different way, Ernesto Diaz-Infante is using classical and jazz strategies together to create a cerebral but also rather inviting piano music. Classical-jazz crossovers? Nu-cool? Maybe, but two more different results of such cross-fertilisation would be hard to come by.

Richard Cochrane

Harald Kimmig -- Im Freien

(Hybrid CD15)

Harald Kimmig (violin)

Kimmig sounds like nobody else here: an essentially minimal player, favouring motorik, highly repetitive music which is encouraged to run at an extraordinary tempo. Some of it is certainly improvised, though Kimmig refers to the pieces as "compositions", and so perhaps they are. They can certainly reach some pretty excitable peaks of frenzied sawing as the tempo accelerates, which it often does.

The music has a clear tonal root, although on some pieces it drifts a long way from conventional harmony and on a few the playing of notes is abandoned entirely in favour of noise-derived textures. Some of these are quite unpleasant -- Kimmig has a liking for a heavily-rosined sound anyway, and "Holz auf Holz" revels in the fingernails-on-blackboard sound which is playing is always threatening but usually avoids. Generally, however, a note-spinning approach predominates in which a single bar in isolation means very little, but the build-up of motivic units creates an effective development; extended timbres are integrated into this structure with considerable success, although the teeth-on-edge quality is never far away and there is a danger that some of these pieces will simply grate on the ears.

Over half of the pieces here are recorded outside (hence, I think, the title), using environmental sounds such as running water for accompaniment. Sometimes this works fine, as in the later pieces; at others, the backgrounds are left rather to do as they please, which is a technique you either like or you don't. Indeed, the album starts very oddly before settling down: a short, jazzy piece unlike anything else on the disk is followed by a six-minuter in which very quiet and rather aimless violin sounds are just audible beneath the sound of a running stream. Then "Holz auf Holz", at which point many listeners will be tempted to turn the thing off and have done with it.

It would be a pity if they did, because there is a lot of enjoyable music here, well-played and packed with energy and excitement. The long track, "Mandala", is well-titled, and many of these pieces partake of a sort of manic minimalism. This is certainly not an understated album, nor a groundbreaking one, but it's enjoyable for all that. Indeed, it sounds very much as if it could have been recorded in the late 1960s, when it would have been seminal.

Richard Cochrane

Klapper/Ulher/Morgenstern: Momentaufnahmen

([Nur Nicht Nur](#): CD1001030)

Martin Klapper (toys, electronics), Birgit Ulher (trumpet), Jurgen Morgenstern (bass, voice)

Russell/Turner: The Second Sky

([Emanem](#): 4058)

John Russell (guitar), Roger Turner (percussion)

Free improvisation has many faces, and these discs represent one of the most enduring of them: the quiet, unassuming kind which works with intimate little sounds, and which eschews structure, form, technique or any of that stuffy old nonsense. Music like this is, as a result, not always very accessible, indeed it could be said to be the musicians' jobs to make it accessible, to provide the listener with a way into their closed, quiet sound-world. Then again, one of the pleasures of this kind of thing is finding your own way in, so it could be said that all the musicians have to do is play.

To characterise Klapper/Ulher/Morgenstern as a trumpet, bass and drums trio is laughably inappropriate. They just happen to play a group of instruments which might be employed to make a different kind of music, that's all. Anyway, Martin Klapper hardly plays a trap set: his "kit" here consists entirely of toys and electronic noises. Although what Morgenstern occasionally makes sounds which recognisably come from a bass, he most often doesn't, and those moments are oddly illuminating but not typical; the same goes for Ulher.

The pianist has already impressed this year with a previous release on [Nur Nicht Nur](#), [PUT](#). The group has changed, and Ulher is perhaps slightly more forthright here; anyway, her style, which mixes breathy and valvey noise with skywriting surprises -- albeit rather scrawly, Cy Twombly-style skywriting -- is, again, a revelation.

She does play in some weird trios, though. What Klapper does will be well-known to followers of the European improv scene, and he doesn't disappoint; a one-man tropical rainforest populated by cheap plastic cracker-fillers. Morgenstern plays arco most of the time, and vocalises in ways which often blend with his playing. This is hospitable terrain for anyone, and particularly someone with such conventionally "musical" tendencies as Ulher.

It's amazing, then, first that she chooses to play in such company, and second that she clearly thrives on it. Of course, players like Klapper and Morgenstern are more sensitive than they first appear -- in fact, one might say that music of their musicianship comes from great listening skills and superb responsiveness -- and the way the trio works together is a treat to hear.

On [PUT](#), Ulher worked with British percussionist Roger Turner, and Turner is a good bet in this kind of environment, although he's a far more conventional player than Klapper (which isn't saying a lot). He and Russell are a natural pairing; the guitarist is playful and percussive, fusing an aesthetic of clicks, bangs and scrapes with an underlying style which is actually rather lyrical and undeniably note-based. The same is true for Turner, and it's what differentiates him from Klapper, because one can still hear the techniques of more familiar drumming lurking within the dances he does on his madly eclectic kit.

It was unlikely, then, that a duo between these two was going to disappoint. The music is superficially rather similar to that of the trio above, but it's actually from a different universe. While the trio draw on ambient sound, extraneous noise and the everyday outbursts of objects around us, Russell and Turner are far more interested in the sound-worlds of Cage's piano pieces, of flamenco, the mandolin and balalaika, of the gamelan, even jazz, and so on; musical precedents, then. None of which is to make value judgements either way, but simply to point out the disparity between these apparently generically similar releases.

Turner, as has been remarked before in these pages, is a rather remarkable player. He's a "proper" drummer, not a tabletop manipulator of things, but he sounds more like the latter for much of the time. He's great to watch -- his technique seems haphazard, even comical, but it isn't, or not entirely anyway. When listened to without the visual, his playing reveals itself to be subtle and clever, full of references to percussive styles but never quite falling into any one but his own. One case of the CD not murdering and pickling live improvisation, but providing an otherwise hard-to-achieve view of it.

Roger Turner is a London scene veteran and a man of endless resources. His solo recordings are nocturnal and gentle, but in groups he's often raucous, percussive, abrasive and badly behaved. Something, then, like the late John Stevens, with whom he worked closely for many years. Here there's a compromise; he sometimes lets fly the most outrageous of boistrous interventions, but for much of the time there is a mournful lyricism about his playing which is nothing if not unlikely. It takes some determination to play the way Turner plays for so many decades, always finding new things within it; this duet is an ideal place to make the acquaintance of both players.

Kristoff K Roll & Xavier Charles: La Piece

([Potlatch](#): HO2)

Jean-Christophe Camps (electroacoustic devices), Carole Rieussec (electroacoustic devices), Xavier Charles (clarinet)

Kristoff K Roll are electroacoustic duo Camps and Rieussec. They make sparse, rather self-effacing music which nevertheless manages to be more than a passive backdrop for guest clarinettist Charles. Much of the music here is very quiet -- headphone music, indeed, as Chris Atton rightly characterises it -- but that's not to say it's just ambient wallpaper.

On the contrary, this trio play very dynamically, if with threads of continuity. On "Grange Nocturne", for instance, a see-sawing violin sample guides the listener gently through a quiet storm of bowed cymbals, tiny skittering sounds and, of course, Charles's clarinet. This approach is continued through most of the tracks, giving each one an identity and making the album as a whole very listenable.

The material Charles plays is, as one might expect, pretty gestural stuff, generally offering up interesting timbres rather than melodic lines. Charles does, however, have a good sense of space, and his relationship with the electronics is sure enough to create rather sparky interplay from such a quiet, apparently unassuming bunch.

Disks like this can initially be off-putting, but there's much to enjoy here. It does require an odd kind of listening, both concentrated (because it's so quiet) and at the same time slightly vague. KKR have a lot in common with soudscape artists, often using identifiable sound-sources to create imaginary auditory landscapes through which Charles roams, sometimes creeping warily, sometimes darting about like a bird. This can be very evocative for the headphonaut, to whome this disc has a lot to offer.

Richard Cochrane

Henry Kuntz: One One & One

(Hummingbird CD2/3)

Henry Kuntz (reeds), Don Marvel (electronics)

Opeye: Moss 'Comes Silk

(Hummingbird: CD1)

Henry Kuntz, Ben Lindgren, Brian Godchaux, Esten Lindgren, John Kuntz (all various instruments)

James Fei: For Saxophone with Card Reed and Gated Amplification/Camptown Races 1

(Organised Sound Recordings: no number)

James Fei (reeds)

New CD label Hummingbird offers opportunities for non-Californians to discover the unique Henry Kuntz; on the other coast, fellow saxophonist Fei releases a tantalising mini-CD, also on his own label. Listening to musicians' releases on their own labels is often a wonderful way to encounter them, providing direct access to the performer's conception with no intermediation.

Avant-Shamanic Trace Jazz is vaguely reminiscent of the experiments by Archie Shepp and others involving playing along with raucous reed groups like the Master Musicians of Joujouka. The difference is that Opeye find themselves very much in a postmodern frame. Thus, the quest for ethnic and cultural "authenticity" (a snark if ever there was one) is replaced by, well, rampant fusion, appropriation, even fakery.

This is no bad thing, of course, and Opeye make a joyous riot of a record. "Fancy Dancing Jaguar" is a case in point, with the Chinese Musette playing something sounding like a Middle-Eastern Coltrane whklel the group free-improvises; John Kuntz does wild, scrawling violence to a steel guitar, Esten Lindgren's trombone occasionally making the sound *um-pah*, a moment later laying down a mournful ballad solo. Everything into the melting pot at once: that seems to be the recipe here. Often the results of such a thing are ugly, but here they're a pleasure to listen to. One of those records where you wish you were in the band when they made it.

One One & One is quite a contrast, a double CD featuring Kuntz solo on tenor sax on the first disk, then in duet with Don Marvel on the second. Unfortunately, the latter's grasp of improvising electronics extends little further than sampling and looping the things Kuntz plays. The results aren't terrible, just a little dull. If you wish improvising musicians played everything five times, this is for you.

The solo disk, however, is well worth the admission price on its own. Kuntz reveals himself as a powerful presence on the sax, and how disciplined of his to stick to tenor, in these days of everybody playing ten different horns. Instead of falling back on changes of instrumentation for variety, he has to make music.

This he does with a sound which combines impressively-controlled ultra-high-register squeaks and whistles with the tenor's more conventional voice. One is strongly reminded of Evan Parker's way of playing with John Stevens -- it's logical, timbrally adventurous, often percussive and always full of ideas. Not that Kuntz sounds like Parker, as his voice is too jazzy and American for that. Fantastic stuff.

New Yorker James Fei is another reedsman who likes to play solo, but there the similarities come to an end. Although not academically trained in music, he's attracted to the classical avant garde, and although an improviser his pieces often involve a conceptual compositional element. This self-released CD-R, if it's still available to buy (numbered copies...) offers twelve minutes of truly intriguing music from a relentless experimenter. The main piece inserts a cardboard reed into the sax and amplifies it, resulting in a ten-minute evolution from tiny, semi-random clicks into a wall of feedback. Truly inventive stuff, much closer to electroacoustic composition than to jazz or improv. Let's hope Fei records more an often.

Richard Cochrane

Perelman/Rosen: The Hammer

([Leo](#): CDLR286)

Ivo Perelman (saxophones), Jay Rosen (drums)

Kyhl/Nielsen: Ping Pong

([Av-Art](#): AACD1007/1008)

Christian Kyhl (reeds), Peter Friis Nielsen (bass guitar)

Leandre/Roger: Tricotage

([Ambiances Magnetiques](#): AM078CD)

Joelle Leandre (bass, voice), Danielle P Roger (percussion)

Three albums of duets: drums and reeds, reeds and bass, bass and reeds, as if to prove how wildly different the results can be from such a starting-point. Listening to them in succession, one is struck by the diasporas between free jazz and free improv, melody and texture, tradition and innovation, the old and the new. And one is also struck by how artificial those distinctions really are, and how many nuances and complexities they really hide.

Perelman's freewheeling jazz is relatively well-known; he's regularly characterised as a howler and a screamer, and in some respects this record will do nothing to appease the nay-sayers, any more than playing *Interstellar Space* is likely to shut up those who think Coltrane went off the rails after *A Love Supreme*. But it's lazy to wheel out Coltrane and Ali's monumental reed-and-drum duet as if it were the only yardstick by which to measure such undertakings, and as if one needed a yardstick at all. Much as Perelman's spiralling lines here do at times recall those from the album thirty-three years its senior, and Rosen occasionally pushes into the kinds of polyrhythms most often associated with Ali, this is very contemporary free jazz and by no means a nostalgia trip.

Rosen's powerhouse performance here really does help. He has boundless energy and a quick imagination, and his long history with Perelman gives the men a mutual understanding which is crucial in such potentially exposed surroundings. They play fast and furiously for most of this record, making it a pummelling experience but a hugely enjoyable one; Perelman's gift for melody, which has been frequently remarked upon on these pages, is here in spades, and there is a genuine rugged beauty in his voice which can leave one breathless. His occasional lapses into tenderness -- "Five Avocados" sounding, for a second or two, as if it's gearing itself up for a slow, smokey "Round Midnight" -- are cut with an acid sourness, avocados being best eaten with lemon juice, after all. Not for the faint of heart, this is nevertheless big, generous music which is crafted with an almost lost skill in an utterly modern style. Perelman and Charles Gayle are about the only masters of this kind of music, and a new album by either is generally cause for celebration, this one being no exception.

Leandre and Roger don't make free jazz, but free improv. There's a similar ferocity of energy, though, and it's not always at the quiet volumes most often associated with duets involving bass players. Leandre has a particular talent for sustained, timbral playing -- one could call it "textural", if that didn't imply some kind of background drone which is pretty distant from what she's most comfortable with. Roger is a fine partner in this regard, a percussionist who often favours scraping, dragging, rattling sounds to the sharp metronome crack of the stick.

The nine, mostly mid-length tracks here all have the great virtue of sounding distinctive and unique, something which can be very hard to achieve with improvising duets. Also, it's untrue that Leandre and Roger dispense with their fluid pulse or the roccoco melodicism which make Perelman and Rosen's disk so enjoyable. Indeed, while Leandre may not be a natural single-line player, "Au Clair du Lune" reveals her to be more than competent, with a singing arco we hear too rarely from her bass, accompanied by Roger's extremely abstruse punctuation. A little later "Knit One, Purl Three" plays joyously with various pulsed and non-pulsed times, reminding the listener that Leandre spends a lot of time with Anthony Braxton.

Peter Friis Nielsen is a very different kind of bass player: a player of the electric bass, to be precise, an instrument rarely associated with the world of jazz except in the much sneered-at world of "jazz-rock fusion". Which is a bit of a shame for Nielsen, who made a wonderful album with Peter Brotzmann last year. That connection (what with Brotzmann's undeserved reputation as a relentless noise-maker) might lead one to expect this pairing to be creating a big racket, as Perelman and Rosen do together or, to a lesser extent, Leandre and Roger. They have things in common with both pairs, but perhaps not the things you expect at first.

For a start, this music is melody-based like Perelman and Rosen's, Christian Kyhl being a rather linear player -- both he and Nielsen are ex-Tchicai sidemen, and there's a lot of Tchicai in Kyhl's approach. The short pieces -- there are sixty spread over two disks -- often begin with a curl of a tune and wander casually away from it like

the opening premise of a story told by a drunk. One has to be entirely honest here and say that Kyhl's voice isn't quite matured yet, and he seems, from time to time, to reach for things he doesn't have the finesse to pull off. The halting rhythm in his lines sounds at times like it may have technical rather than aesthetic roots, and although Kyhl uses a Braxtonian fourteen different reeds and flutes on this session, he doesn't sound equally comfortable with all of them.

It's as well, then, that this duo have wisely kept their statements brief and pithy, their subjects simple and direct. One is reminded of Sheppard and Tippet's *66 Shades of Lipstick*, a groundbreaking record in market terms (it made huge sales for a free improv disk) and one characterised by to-the-point vignettes rather than extended wig-outs. This strategy is essential to the success of this disk, and successful it is, not least because it allows Kyhl's voice to grow on you without overstepping its (possible) limitations. Last month we covered some solo sax albums which pushed the technical envelope pretty hard, but some people, understandably, want their improvised music served a little cooler, more connected to the traditions of Tristano and Guiffre than Trane, Shepp and Ayler. Nielsen, what's more, plays wonderfully flexible stuff, mostly with conventional chops rather than sonic experiments, and that seems to give each piece a rubberiness which contrasts strongly with the muscular pulse of the other two duets discussed here. Well worth seeking out.

Richard Cochrane

Vlatko Kucan Quartet: Live at Palo-Palo

([True Muze](#) : TUMUCD9803)

Vlatko Kucan (reeds), Tomasz Stanko (trumpet), Michael Danner (trombone, tuba), Jay Oliver (bass), Bill Elgart (drums)

Although the names may not be familiar -- with the exception of guest Stanko -- this is something of an all-star lineup. The list of American and European free jazz "names" these musicians have worked with is exhausting to read and would be futile to reproduce or hint at. The implication that these are going to be high-quality players with a solid jazz grounding is there from the start.

Victor Kucan admits to being a kind of conservative. He rejects out of hand both neo-bop and a certain "postmodern, conceptual approach" which he finds in the avant garde. On tenor, he often sounds like Lester Young, which is disconcerting to say the least; his soprano is extremely nasal, but the notes he plays are straight out of Bird. It's true that he does also step into stormier waters at times, but their function is always ornamental, never structural. The more difficult moments -- to wit, his solo on "Paris Blues" -- soon settle into a blustery but precise style something like Archie Shepp's update of Coleman Hawkins. It's an effective solo, with all the pace and unexpectedness of a vintage Steve Lacy, and for the most part the extended techniques are well integrated into Kucan's general updated swing-to-bop aesthetic.

All this might leave you feeling that Michael Danner is the last person Kucan would call then putting a quartet together> Danner barks and brays with his horn, reminiscent of both Paul Rutherford and George Adams. Make no mistake, Danner really has his boots on for this session, and he plays like he's dancing on a hot-plate, but these two voices really shouldn't work together. They do, not because they have a lot in common, but because they compliment one another so neatly; if Kucan is fundamentally a jazzier with an occasional taste for the leftfield, Danner sounds like a tailgate noise-merchant with a bucket of low-down-dirty sounds who, every now and then, remembers to dredge up a little bebop from the murky soup he loves to swim in.

The rhythm section doesn't really address this dynamic much. Although both Elgart and Oliver, to whom this release is dedicated in memoriam, are very fine hard bop players, they rarely step outside that genre. Still, Elgart has a far lighter touch than most, and Oliver's liking for funky riffing is distinctive enough to give the group some extra colour. The compositions, with the exception of "Tuba Tune", could have stepped straight out of a 1950s Blue Note session, so it's nice that the bass and drums fit with that ethos so well even while the soloists take things outside. Oliver also deserves honourable mention for his five-minute solo intro to "Round Midnight", a pensive, bowed piece which he paces and shapes masterfully on the disc's only standard.

The presence of Stanko is also welcome, of course, as his freewheeling trumpet can cover all of the bases frequented by Kucan and Danner, in a sense unifying the music even further. His solo on the opening "Dance of the Robot People" is superheated and infuriatingly surprising at every turn, full of those brassy, loudmouthed blues which can only emerge from the bell of a trumpet.

Richard Cochrane

Paul Lansky: Conversation Pieces

([Bridge](#): Bridge9083)

Paul Lansky (piano, synthesisers, composition)

Lansky is a Princeton University professor who has created this odd collection of electronic music which is difficult to place in terms of what, exactly, he is trying to achieve. Using rhythms derived from recordings of conversations, he orchestrates piano sounds, orchestral simulations and cheesy synth patches to create what sometimes sound like straight chamber compositions and at others recall the washes and bleeps of ambient electronica. "Same Scene, Nine Years Later", an example of the latter, takes a heavily-processed conversation and scatters quick, arpeggio-like patterns around it on an instrument which is somewhere between a piano and a xylophone. The resultant stoned drift is pleasant enough, but the piece goes nowhere -- it simply meanders along for eleven and a half minutes before petering out. The same problem can be found throughout the disk.

The use of synthesisers with frankly unconvincing sounds also does Lansky no favours, so that even an interesting premise like the enhanced cyberpiano of "Andalusia" suffers ignominious interjections from phoney string and choir sounds which could have emanated from a kid's £99 Christmas keyboard. Lansky's tonal approach need not be a problem, but it too contributes to the directionlessness of these pieces. There is little in the way of functional harmony here, just a general fear of dissonance and a preference for "nice chords" rather than an intelligent sense of harmonic movement. These are pleasant enough pieces of background music, and they would probably sound better performed by live musicians, but ultimately the composition itself is fatuous and unlikely to please any but the least demanding listeners.

Richard Cochrane

Steve Lantner/Mat Maneri: Reaching

([Leo Lab](#): CD062)

Steve Lantner (pianos), Mat Maneri (violin)

Maneri is fast becoming recognised as one of the most important violinists in experimental music. His approach is poised and articulate, yet constantly seems to slip out from under the listener who is looking for either expressionism or lumpy formality. Maneri is certainly a melodist, and the concept of singing out lines so often drummed into learning violinists is something he has clearly taken to heart, and yet his concept of melody is, quite simply, unique.

Without doubt, this is partly due to his father's Partchian division of the octave into 72 discrete steps -- six, presumably, within each semitone. This writer will not pretend to understand how one controls such minute divisions on an instrument like the fiddle (much less on the saxophone, his father's instrument). The effect on the ear is of an opening of melodic possibilities and a virtual abandonment of any principle of functional harmony. Where violinists like Leroy Jenkins use a great deal of microtonal inflections but play basically within the orbit of the tempered scale, Maneri takes that spirit of Romantic lyricism but transports it into outer space, removing the familiar core and leaving only a flexible, polymorphous flesh behind.

He is joined on this occasion by Lantner, who combines a conventional acoustic piano with a digital version so as to have access to the full 72-note gamut. His playing is as much a contrast to his partner's as it is a complement. They share an often queasy fast-slow approach to rhythm and a great range of dynamics, but Lantner, being unable to use glissandos, seems to sketch out the harmonic world of each piece much more fully. It's the piano's traditional role in such situations, after all, and while these are hardly a traditional violin sonatas, there is something of that mind-set here. Certainly the whole thing feels deeply indebted to classical music -- much more than to jazz -- so that when Walter Horn mentions nine classical composers in his sleeve notes without referring to a single jazz influence, it's hardly surprising.

In the absence of any real harmonic movement, however, Lantner sticks to broadly linear work through much of this disc. This makes sense: Maneri isn't a histrionic high-notes man anyway, and a great sludge of microtonal clusters would hardly do him any favours. It's a strategy which yields exciting, well-balanced interplay and the effect of their lines moving around like two flies in a closed room is much more effective than any solo-plus-comping could have been. The overall effect is often of two processes going on independently, but often glancing off one another as they do.

Yes, it's a Maneri album to be treasured; it's also a chance to hear Lantner, not a well-known name on these shores, but an exciting and intelligent player of whom more, no doubt, will be heard in the future. New England seems to be the location of the moment for a new kind of free improvisation, taking its cues from classicism rather than jazz, but the late Romantic spirit of Bartok, Schoenberg and Messiaen rather than the austere Modernists who influenced the genre in its earlier days. There's no sell-out or move to the mainstream here, but there is an exploration of an area of improvised music which has previously been sidelined. As more young players like Lantner come to international attention (however marginal that's bound to be in this music) it will be interesting to see how this strand of free improvisation develops.

Richard Cochrane

Joe Maneri Trio: The Trio Concerts

([Leo](#): CDLR307/308)

Joe Maneri (reeds, piano), Mat Maneri (violina, viola), Randy Peterson

Lantner/Maneri/Morris: Voices Lowered

([Leo](#): CDLR317)

Steve Lantner (piano), Joe Maneri (reeds), Joe Morris (guitar)

Leo Records has been central to the development of the reedsman who Cook & Morton wryly refer to as a 65-year overnight success. It's true that Maneri senior has spent most of his life as an unrecognised maverick, and that only in his autumn years has he garnered the critical acclaim he deserves. Leo issued two disks of the quartet which featured his son Mat and drummer Pederson way back in '93, when Maneri was a far from bankable name; so did HatArt, all of which two years before ECM cottoned on.

For those sessions the three were joined by a succession of first-class bass players (Lockwood, McBee, then Schuller), but as sleeve notes to both of these CDs point out, the trio is a great setting for the elder Maneri's music. Jaw-dropping though they are, the early Leo disks are also as impenetrable as a dense, prickly bramble hedge; the space a trio affords is most welcome.

These concerts were recorded back in '98; two gigs in Massachusetts captured in lovely clarity with a quiet but appreciative audience. Joe takes up the clarinet for the second half of disc 1, and even treats us to a little piano (an instrument on which he's surprisingly revealing, although it has less immediate impact than his saxophone) on disc 2, but otherwise discourses at length on alto or tenor, always in close duet with his son.

Mat Maneri has been working with his father since he was a teenager (and, informally, doubtless much longer), and their close understanding is always strongly evident. It's the common influences of cool jazz and Romanticism, the latter slightly tinged with Eastern European and Mediterranean folk musics, which really glues things together here, that and of course their long-worked-at ability to hear and anticipate one another.

Peterson really drops science in this setting, playing rhythms which are n levels removed from any putative pulse, but which make perfect sense, and the music as a result swings along effortlessly without ever sounding glib. He gets plenty of space, too -- two furiously inventive, at times baffling solos on "Balance + Pulse", neither of which is at all dispensable.

Mat Maneri's increasing use of electric violin is taking him ever further from the traditional gesturss of the jazz fiddle. Here he's reminiscent most of all of Bill Frisell -- of all people -- with his swelled-in chords, ambiguous and pithy. His very melodic side also gets ample room, but what's wonderful here as elsewhere is the counterpoint he creates with his father's tenor; and with Mat on baritone electric violin, even their timbres are closer than ever (one interesting aspect of Joe's playing is that he shows little interest in extremes of timbre, and plays for the most parts clean, clear notes).

The gravitas with which this double-CD is packaged enhances its status as an instant classic; the trio with Joe Morris is slightly more risky. There is no need to fear, however, as those who know [Mat Maneri's duet with Steve Lantner](#) will doubtless have guessed. (It ought to be pointed out that the trio material accounts for about forty minutes of music, with another twenty five of duos and solos, all featuring , which although good do pale a bit in comparison)

The pianist is a spikey, atonal player as far as one can tell, but that just puts Maneri, who studied with a pupil of Berg's, entirely at ease. Lantner, indeed, plays the piano a bit like Joe Maneri does, only with a sharpened sense of purpose and a lot more technique. A slight adjustment in rhythmic approach is audible here compared with the duos with the younger player, who enjoys a queasy rubato, whereas Maneri Snr has a more conventional (although by no means old-fashioned) free swing, not waxing and waning but driving, as it were. Lantner makes the shift effortlessly, perhaps even unconsciously, and the pair make a superb match.

This writer has expressed reservations about Morris before (not in these pages), but his playing is often superb on this recording. He does have a tendency towards superficial effect, but it's almost entirely overcome here in favour of a challenging communion with both partners. He takes a slightly less prominent position compared with the others, allowing him the luxury of interjecting and creating supportive lines which he does with great aplomb. His solos are still a bit widdly-diddly for this writer's taste, but that stuff really is subdued here in favour of co-operative trio playing of a very high order, and when Morris slows down and think about his notes he makes splendidly apposite decisions.

These two releases continue the admirable work Leo Records is doing to get the Maneri catalogue properly established. The Leo Maneris will eventually (perhaps not long from now) come to be viewed in the same was as the Leo Braxtons, Sun Ras, Taylors and Crispells. May there be many more to come, but until then, get the Trio Concerts without delay. If it will save you anything in the postage, the trio with Lantner will be unlikely to

disappoint either.

Richard Cochrane

Larner/Hikage/Gelb: Indistancing

([Leo Lab](#) : CD055)

Brett Larner (koto), Shoko Hikage (koto), Philip Gelb (shakuhachi)

The use of "ethnic" instruments in Western free improvisation is nothing new, of course -- in search of exotic or just unusual timbres, musicians have been picking them up for years. The difference here is that these are exclusively Japanese instruments, in a relatively traditional ensemble, and the musicians involved know the idioms of the music thoroughly, not just from a handful of CDs borrowed from their local library. The result is something extraordinary, something simultaneously very Japanese and entirely Euro-American.

In his thoughtful sleeve-notes, Tetsu Saitoh refers to the principle of biodiversity, whereby an emphasis on genetic purity breeds weakness. While individual musicians can choose to doggedly pursue a single narrow vision with success, it seems that genres as a whole tend to stagnate without the interbreeding which was once called "fusion". Maybe there's something in it; certainly contact with the far East has enriched the work of many Western musicians, and the influence is undoubtedly reciprocal.

This particular fusion is a very specific one. The method -- free improv -- is distinctly European, but the sound-world is Japanese. The title track uses fairly long silences in a manner reminiscent of composer Stomei Satah, while the harmonies will remind many listeners of Takemitsu or even, here and there, more traditional styles. Japanese music has always had a very nuanced approach to melody and timbre which makes this kind of playing sound less incongruous than if these were players with a background in, say, Chinese traditions. This despite the fact that improvisation is not a big part of Japanese musical life, especially in the silk and bamboo traditions from which this ensemble comes.

What makes this more than a genetic freak, then, is that the two parents have more in common than you might think. Influential European and American improvisors have often been influenced by the Zen philosophy which has informed Japanese music for centuries. The idea of creating an auditory space in which sounds are permitted to be themselves came through Cage to a generation of improvisors from Pauline Oliveros to AMM, and although there is a much more conventional musical agenda here, that approach clearly unifies this music too.

Gelb plays shakuhachi like an avant garde saxist, which is to say a bit like a traditional shakuhachi player. The kotoists play as a single voice, despite having met just half an hour before they went on stage to perform this concert, and while there are some extended techniques the focus is not music-making, not gimmicks. The result is a disc of beautiful, thoughtful and exciting interaction -- anyone with a liking for Japanese music will absolutely love it. Highly recommended.

Richard Cochrane

Joelle Leandre Project

([Leo](#): CDLR287)

Joelle Leandre (bass), Marilyn Crispell (piano), Paul Lovens (drums), Richard Teitelbaum (electronics), Carlos Zingazo (violin)

Fredy Studer: Duos 3-13

([For4Ears](#): CD1034)

Fredy Studer (percussion), Jin Hi Kim (komungo), Joelle Leandre (bass), Dorothea Schurch (voice, saw)

Two more releases featuring the currently omnipresent Leandre; perhaps too easy to pass over in the face of her current ubiquity, but that would be a mistake, in one case, at least.

The Leo session is something of a supergroup, with five well-known and pretty like-minded players doing good, old-fashioned free improv like mother used to make it. Crispell is, of course, a giant, and Lovens will be known to most readers; Teitelbaum, who has been around for a long while but not always in these circles, is an increasingly important and prominent voice in the emerging electronic improv scene, while Zingazo is a relative newcomer but more than just a promising youngster.

What's nice about this disc, apart from the five big and impressive musical personalities one gets to hear on it, is the way that a group like this can make improvised music so accessible and involving. Each of the nine tracks sounds quite different and, although they start with a potentially off-putting (actually rather exciting) free blow-out, what emerges later is a very sensitive, sound-based music which will take a tiny motivic idea -- like the swooping pitch-bends of the second track -- and develop it rather than shying away from anything which might be regarded as "repetitious". On that track, Crispell even strikes up a walking, tub-thumping rhythm. yes, a rhythm: you can get killed for it in some neighbourhoods, but there you go.

None of which is to imply that this is improv-lite. This group really push their music-making hard, and the results are predictably marvellous. Teitelbaum is the wild-card here, throwing unexpected spanners into the works and keeping everyone on their toes. Of course, the other four could comfortably make music without such an imperative but, with it, they seem to be just a little more challenged. It's a challenge they rise to, creating heterogeneous music with an identity all their own. Very cool stuff.

Shame the same can't really be said for Fredy Studer's duets album, also featuring Leandre on some tracks. That's part of the problem right there: duet albums are always like this, bitty and slightly unsatisfying when listened through end-to-end. All of the players are interesting, but one can't help feeling it would have been a lot more fun if they'd all got together and played as a quartet.

Well, it won't do to complain about the records someone could have made instead of this one. Schurch is a fascinating singer in the classical avant garde style with a real sense of story-telling to her music, and Studer accompanies her with suitably portentous percussion. These tracks would probably suit a Diamanda Galas fan down to the ground, with their Gothic and slightly unsettling atmosphere conjured by banshee arabesques and funereal or skittering membranophones.

Jin Hi Kim plays something called a komungo, which sounds like a relative of the koto, although this writer has no idea what one looks like. Her playing is slow-moving and atmospheric, and the instrument clearly gives her a large range of timbral options. She sometimes favours slow repetitions of deep bass notes, at other times playing in a manner more reminiscent of some Chinese folk musics, especially that associated with the shamisen and used to accompany singing and storytelling. Studer's contributions here tend to be either furrowed-browed water-gongery (which can be rather orientalist, if such a nasty term is excusable) and rattling riffs (which are a bit more like it).

The tracks with Leandre are mostly much more reserved affairs. As with Schurch, these have a decidedly dark tinge to them which is partly down to Studer's regular use of bowed cymbals and the like. Leandre gives it a certain amount of stick, but these tracks never really catch fire; the two seem to be playing in different rooms for much of the time, and when one of them sets off with an idea and the other appears not to catch it, the results can be simply annoying.

In short, as a CD this just doesn't work. This writer suspects that a duet album of Studer and Jin or Studer and Schurch would be a pretty nice project. His duos with Leandre, however, do neither player any credit: they're a mismatch, pure and simple, and there's not a great deal they can be done to overcome that. As it is, this is a disk with a lot of good tracks on it, but not enough of anything and programmed in an almost perversely irritating manner. In a way, this is actually a credit to these folks: after each track, one wants more, not something completely different.

Joelle Leandre and Sebi Tramontana: E'Vero

([Leo](#): CDLR275)

Joelle Leandre (bass, voice), Sebi Tramontana (trombone)

Joelle Leandre will be a name known to many readers; she's a bass player who seems always in demand, and no bad thing. Sebi Tramontana may not be such a well-known name, so this set of nine improvised duets is an ideal way to get to know him a little. They're active and robust pieces, the product of two musicians who are confident enough to play assertively, to make music together with no hint of the customary deferential scrabbling about.

The first thing one notices about Tramontana is his penchant for extremely short, explosive notes which leave the air shivering in their wake, but that's not all he does by any means. He works with a whole spectrum of strategies from textural growling all the way to jazzy blues, where his wha-wha mute makes a surprising appearance. He seems completely in tune with Leandre's rhythmic approach, too, allowing his own contribution to make frequent use of repetition; at those points, the two voices can seem like two parts of a machine moving to different permutations of the same underlying pulsation. He does occasionally whistle, sounding like the milkman doing his rounds, but not often enough to become annoying.

I don't know what it is about Leandre's playing that makes so many people use words like "organic", "body" and even "flesh" -- probably her gender -- but John Corbett falls into the same trap in his notes to this recording. Nevertheless, he's right about the eloquence of her playing. The mastery she has over the full range of techniques at her disposal is one thing, but the intelligence to make such imaginative use of them is quite another. Leandre is one of our great bass players, a fact perhaps overshadowed by the sheer number of really fine musicians who have taken to the instrument in free improvised music. She has a fluency which ought to be the envy of many of her peers, and although she doesn't have a bag of tricks at her side she uses a smaller range of articulations to very sophisticated ends.

Together, these two make very convincing music. More note-based than the European avant garde tends to be, they're hardly jazzy enough to be called jazzers either. They occupy a territory somewhere between the two, in the company of increasing numbers of free improvisors. Afficionados shouldn't miss this one, and as an introduction to Tramontana for those of us who didn't know his name before it's extremely valuable.

Richard Cochrane

Matt Turner: The Mouse that Roared

(Meniscus: MNSCS002)

Matt Turner (cello)

Matthew Goodheart: Songs from the Time of Great Questioning

(Meniscus: MNSCS001)

Matthew Goodheart (piano)

Dan DeCellis: Chamber Music

([Sachimay](#): SCA9350)

Dan DeCellis (piano), James Coleman (theremin), Anita DeCellis (voice), Katt Fernandez (violin), Gary Fieldman (percussion)

Leandre/Occhipinti: Incandescences

(Tonesetters: TS007)

Joelle Leandre (bass), Giorgio Occhipinti (piano)

Pianists often seem to have the weight of the classical tradition on their shoulders, just like saxophonists have the jazz greats looking over theirs. Here are releases which, in different ways, seem to engage with that tradition without being weighed down by it.

Although Occhipinti is a young jazz pianist, his playing here with Leandre has strongly classical, ven Classical, resonances. The whole thing can often sound like a sonata for double bass and piano, conceived by a delirious Hindemith. If that doesn't sound much like a compliment, it is. These two create wonderfully rich chordal structures, finding a place somewhere between functional harmony, jazz and atonality with not a note agreed in advance.

Occhipinti is great at varying the levels of density in his playing, a concept which his partner for this session understands only too well. And just as the music can range from big, loud chording to light, detailed playing, so it also covers the ground between the melodic and almost soothing right through to (occasional) blasting or insectoid improv. Those who don't know this pianist's work are urged to check this out; it's very impressive, and Leandre, always a valuable duettist, works wonderfully with him throughout.

Dan DeChellis, on the other hand, takes his classical influence sufficiently to heart as to refer to what he does as "Chamber Music", and to call himself a "composer". This group of three improvisations certainly has a strong whiff of Boulez about it, a kind of crepuscular quiet having crept over even the noisier parts, of which there are rather few.

Instead, Anita DeChellis's impeccable soprano bobs and weaves in an environment rather like that of the magnificent Pli Selon Pli, all tiny gestures which seem to join up, across the delicious gaps, to create something distantly related to melodic lines. Special mention should also go to Coleman's fantastically melodramatic theremin, sounding more like Messiaen's Ondes Mertenot in these settings than the sci-fi camp it usually conjures up.

Matthew Goodheart also sounds as if he has a debt to Boulez, but this time to his intense Piano Sonatas rather than his often spare chamber music. Goodheart's compositions (for so they are called) are frenetic, in-your-face Modernism, pin-sharp and bristling with detail. There's always plenty of detail to be heard in this kind of music, of course.

Where Goodheart does well is in coming out of the academic concern with structure and micro-level formal ideas and onto the level of the dramatic. Goodheart's music builds into surging crescendoes one moment, is glimpsed enticingly behind veils of chromatic noise the next. Doubtless Boulez and his coterie would have found such things hopelessly quaint and nostalgic, but they seem more contemporary now that the old "big ideas" have had their day. There is also a jazzy piece devoted to Ornette (not at all bad) and a piano interior piece (surprisingly funky), but what Goodheart does best is what he does most of the time here: atonal music of a pleasingly forceful clarity.

Richard Cochrane

LEGO: Kneel Down Like a Saint Gorilla and Stop

(2:13 Music: CD003)

John Bisset (guitar), Viv Dogan Corringham (guitar), Jorg Graumann (guitar), Ivor Kallin (bass guitar), Steve Mallaghan (guitar), Rick Nogalski (guitar), Nigel Teers (guitar), Bogo (Duplo two-string guitar), Adam Bohman (guitar, tape), David Holmes (conde hermanas), Richard Sanderson (voice), Milly Singha (voice)

The London Electric Guitar Orchestra is an idiosyncratic project spearheaded by Bisset (the regular members are the first eight listed above; the others guest on two tracks) which combines non-standard instrumentation with extended techniques and an interest in alternative notation systems. The music is often deeply indebted to the minimalist school, using repeating rhythmic ideas generated from prepared guitar effects. Their own "Frog", for example, builds layers of riff-like textures and quasi-solos (not much melodic development goes on) very successfully. Unashamedly relying on distorted, rock-derived textures and pentatonic scales, it's still much more interesting than most of what comes out of the out-rock stable and manages at times to suggest Steve Reich.

It's a group effort mostly, and certainly what stays with you after the CD is finished is the ensemble sound, varied using effects and also the qualities of the sometimes exotic instruments which go by the generic name "electric guitar" (a "Duplo two-string" is not a thing you can buy in Denmark Street, I promise you). This being the case, it is impossible to pick out individual members for praise or blame -- and there is a good bit of both to be handed out if the perpetrators could but be identified. Certainly some of these folk can really play. Certainly one or two are struggling. Nobody seems to care.

The Orchestra instead delights in the absurd, the comical and particularly anything which might confirm the worst suspicions of anyone who might have questions to ask about this kind of thing. On "System", Singha wails as if being dropped into a chip fryer and "Haey!" is a piece lasting less than half a minute, at least a third of which consists of unaccompanied and pretty unpleasant burping. "Bonnie Georgie Campbell" is a setting of the traditional Scots lyric using lots of aggressive strumming but no logic. Ex-member Richard Sanderson's "Kite" sounds like it is about to turn into "Louie Louie" at any moment. More than one piece starts with a count-in, a technique that groups with the word "orchestra" in their name usually try to avoid. They have started using the slogan "Never Knowingly Understood".

At their best, they pull it off and produce stuff which justifies their own PR (and combining humour with questionable aptitude is always going to be risky business). At their worst, they could be rehearsing something they all know isn't working, just because the person who came up with it is the one who owns the PA. On my scorecard, this elegant analytic distinction yields just four lousy tracks and a full nine highly enjoyable ones. This, in layman's terms, makes the album mostly good, occasionally bad. Which is better than most recordings of experimental music, which tend to be either mind-boggling from start to finish or uniformly execrable.

Sometimes, the lack of conventional technique is a stumbling block, but usually it's not. The compositions are more related to process music than freeform expressionism, which means that fumbles, wrong notes and pinging, misfingered cock-ups can just become part of the process. This will annoy the hell out of the sixth-form scalemeisters who spend all day trying to learn Steve Vai licks. Even if one of these guys actually turning up to a L.E.G.O. gig is unlikely, the idea is enough to make at least this listener crack a smile.

Richard Cochrane

Gregor Hotz: Solo

(FMP: OWN90012)

Gregor Hotz (reeds), Nicholas Bussman (cello)

Urs Leimgruber: Blue Log

([For4Ears](#): CDNR1137)

Urs Leimgruber (saxophones)

Seth Misterka: MOH

([Newsonic](#): 17)

Seth Misterka (saxophones, samples)

Too many of them there may be, and unapproachable they often feel, but there are times when only an ascetic solo saxophone album will do. Here are three very recent releases from artists you may or may not have heard of. There's Hotz, who's played sideman to Fuchs, Lacy and Koch; Leimgruber, whose quartet album with Marilyn Crispell was [reviewed](#) in the last edition; and finally there's Misterka, whose work with the [Middletown Creative Orchestra](#), [CCM4](#) and other groups will be known to regular readers.

Both Hotz and Leimgruber take a traditional, "vocabulary statement" approach, the latter much more than the former. Although both used "extended techniques" very heavily, Leimgruber's disc is by far the more virtuosic-sounding, and each piece draws some of its coherence from the fact that it focuses on a small and unique technical range; Leimgruber virtually uses timbre like Sonny Rollins used melody, as a source of constant, effervescent invention within a restricted orbit.

Hotz does take this sort of approach -- on "Mondo Cane", for example, he tries submerging his bass horn while playing it, something which sounds okay enough, although anyone who's listened to a lot of Lacy or Zorn will have heard it before. He's most effective, though, when he puts these kinds of ideas aside and simply pursues a stream of consciousness. The results are low-key and not, initially, very involving, but they're worth sticking with.

Leimgruber grabs you immediately and ensures that, at every moment, he has your full attention. Sometimes we need that, especially when he has such enjoyable ways to make good use of the attention got thereby. Hotz is a little more diffident, and doesn't seem to mind whether you listen or not. It can sound like a bedroom tape at times, but much of the music here is surprisingly imaginative once you let it get hold of you.

Hotz has Bussmann on the final third of the disc, which is an odd strategy because it makes the album look broken-backed before it's even out of the cellophane. There's a good fifty minutes of solo stuff here anyway, and it's hard to see what tacking these duets on the end was intended to achieve. They're nice enough, but the sleeve notes' claim that these two musicians share the same vocabulary isn't borne out by what's here. Bussmann is a pretty straight cellist, working mainly with long, bowed tones or rhythmic ostinati while Hotz takes solos. Both play well, but one yearns for a more dynamic rhythm section which would really stretch the reedsman so we could see what he's really made of.

Leimgruber's disc is shorter than the solo section of Hotz's, but it packs a terrific punch. As ever with such things, the insert assures us that there were no overdubs involved, and so Leimgruber's can-it-be-for-real techniques must be for real after all. Albums like this can be terribly tedious, and I suppose that someone with no interest at all in saxophone technique might find it a bit of a drag, but Leimgruber pushes his wildly eccentric vocabulary in some satisfyingly musical directions. The end results are consistently listenable assuming, as always, you like that sort of thing; and this disc has moments which are eye-bogglingly impressive both technically and musically.

Seth Misterka's solo disc is the shortest of the lot, and the least overtly serious-minded. While Hotz and Leimgruber -- quite properly -- try to boil down their musical conceptions in this most exposed of formats, Misterka layers percussion, electronics and other bits and bobs alongside his sax in an overtly overdubbed manner. The results are fun, and there are even tunes, which may come as a surprise to those who know Misterka as the hardcore modernist behind [CCM4](#).

The compositions -- for compositions they are -- are lumpy and distinctly badly-behaved. "Pizza Pete" sounds like it's barging through a crowd with a Pepperoni Special on each arm, while "Pornographic Music" takes the cinematic associations of the solo sax to their logical conclusion by dubbing on the sounds of people... well, you work it out.

Misterka has a solid, if unconventional technique, but many of these pieces are played with gusto rather than precision, which only adds to the overall sense of bad attitude and cheerful make-do. None of this should be taken to imply that this is an easy record, with tracks like the bristlingly complicated "RAM the Robot" and the industrial noise collage "[12.1.99]". It's pretty harsh in places, but there's a sense of humour running throughout it which leavens what can otherwise turn into a rather lonely and frustrating kind of music.

This isn't really a solo sax record, in the sense that it's a solo record by a saxophonist who also does a lot of other things. It just shows how different these things can be, though, from the traditional solo reed workout. Not that there's anything wrong with those -- Leimgruber's, especially, is an excellent piece of work, and one hopes that we'll hear more from him in the future.

Richard Cochrane

Evan Parker: Foxes Fox

([Emanem](#): 4035)

Evan Parker (saxophones), Steve Beresford (piano), John Edwards (bass), Louis Moholo (percussion)

Leimgruber/Crispell/Leandre/Hauser: Quartet Noir

([Les Disques Victo](#): cd067)

Urs Leimgruber (saxophones), Marilyn Crispell (piano), Joelle Leandre (bass), Fritz Hauser (drums)

There are a few classic combinations which, however hard free improvisors try to distance themselves from the jazz idiom, just won't be kept down. This is one of them, the reeds-and-rhythm format which was a staple of bebop from its earliest inception and which formed the basis of Lennie Tristano's experiments with free music nearly half a century ago. A lot's changed since then but, it seems, not the appeal of the quartet, even for players like these who are often seen in far more unusual groupings.

Parker's quartet is no telephone band; these guys have all been playing together for some time, although it's the first time (to this writer's knowledge) that they've preserved their music on CD. Moholo and Parker are, of course, acknowledged masters; Beresford is an under-sung but long-standing member of the improvised music community, while Edwards is the young whizz-kid who has, in the past few years, impressed and challenged playing partners old enough to be his parents.

This release is nice in that it contains four quartet pieces totalling nearly an hour and also (in typically generous Emanem style) four duets and a trio which were recorded on the same day. Those pieces, only one of which includes Parker, provide a useful way into the styles of the individual musicians for those who are unfamiliar with some or all of them.

The saxophonist's will surely be the best-known of the voices here anyway. He has several tones he can adopt in different settings, but only one which really suits this restless, jazzy setting; his twitchy, sometimes sinuously linear style which largely dispenses with extended techniques (with one exception: his trademarked way of making a staccato note burst off the reed like a bubble in a hot mud pool). One can listen to him doing this all day and never get tired of it; he's a constant fountain of invention, an atonal Sonny Rollins unremittingly chasing down fresh ideas and refusing to repeat himself without good reason. Those who think that Parker's music is samey just aren't listening, and here, in such good company, he is able to fill his lungs with music and blow it out at the kind of pace he enjoys, fast but not furious, mercurial rather than bludgeoning.

"Fox's Fox", the duet of Parker and Moholo, reminded this writer, perhaps in a trivial way or perhaps not, of the great duets Max Roach enjoyed so palpably with free jazz saxophonists. Moholo's playing is hard to describe to someone who hasn't heard it. It seems as if all the beats have broken apart and are suspended in zero gravity, turning this way and that, occasionally colliding and exploding, often drifting about with a disconcerting combination of aimlessness and intense concentration. His chops are so developed that it's often hard to tell what he's doing to create the sounds coming out of the speakers, and within this weirdly dissociated world of splattering, tapping, swooshing sounds shifting without any long-term pulse or apparent logic, an enigmatic genius begins to emerge. For Moholo hits every accent and builds up every phrase with a precision which knocks your socks off.

Beresford is one of those pianists who is referred to most lazily as "like Cecil Taylor". This is because he plays with clusters, apparently random, quick-fire chromatic runs and a focus on rhythm rather than melody or harmony. In this context, however, he is nothing "like Cecil Taylor". Where the latter is a headstrong leader who blasts his way through and expects everyone else to keep up, Beresford here plays a clever supporting role, taking the odd solo but otherwise forming part of the rhythmic tidal wave which keeps the reedsman afloat. In that respect, this is a quite traditional session, Beresford very much part of the rhythm section and Parker taking the lead for the majority of the quartet's music.

Regular readers of (musings) will know that this writer concurs with the many eminent musicians who have called John Edwards because they believe him to be one of the finest bass players in London. His boundless imagination and uncommonly broad repertoire of styles may at times feel bitty, but the snapping ping of his pizzicato already feels like the genesis of an individual voice and, young as he is, he's achieved an enormous amount. His duet with Moholo has an assured unhurriedness which is extremely appealing.

Something of a treat, then, the Parker quartet; a serious but fun, jazzy jam by musicians who know one another and, it seems, enjoy the company. The Quartet Noir disc could hardly be more different, although it's also of extremely high quality. As the name suggests, there is a sombre edge to this music which Parker's quartet never touches on and, in breaking the session down into "movements" rather than punning or whimsical titles, a

debt to classical music is revealed which Parker has rarely shown much interest in.

This music is often spacious, with a limpid rhythm which recalls that terrible phrase "chamber jazz". Again, there are two well-known voices here and two who are less so, but in this case it's the exact opposite of Parker's; Crispell and Leandre and the stars, Leimgruber and Hauser, at least internationally, the lesser-knowns. All of which being said, this quartet has an almost magical compulsiveness about it. Put it in your CD player and it will charm you into leaving it there, not by being pretty (although it is pretty, in a spikey way) but by being so compellingly devised that you can hardly tear away your ears.

If Steve Beresford is "nothing like Cecil Taylor", Marilyn Crispell is really *nothing* like Cecil Taylor. She has always had a genius -- there it is, "genius" twice in the same article -- for creating harmonies which work, for whatever inscrutable reason, in an atonal setting. Occasionally the music becomes more frenetic and the 88-tuned-drums approach gets an airing, but this isn't Crispell at her most characteristic. That voice works better in settings where the heat is turned down off the boil just slightly, as it is for much of this disc. Then she can place those inexplicable chords with an air of great precision; one imagines her fingers moving like those of an expert sculpting clay, pushing and twisting with perfect deliberateness, with her eyes on the intended result rather than the elegantly simple process. If you haven't made time for Crispell yet, it's time you did, and here would be a good place to do it.

It seems almost tedious to say, again, that Leandre is a great bass player. Not like Edwards is a great player -- that is, a young player who is extremely good -- but an established voice with a place in the history of improvised music surely assured by now. Her duet with the saxophonist, which opens "Part II", is all the evidence you need; a minute of pure invention which, like the activities of the agents in *The Matrix*, seems possible only if she were able to slow down time, or else think at the speed of light. Here, as so often, it's her arco playing which impresses; a huge, powerful sound which has within it endless flexibility.

Of the lesser-knowns, Hauser is great at this kind of thing but not, really, a player with much identity. Maybe in other contexts, or in a few years' time, he will be; he has impeccable swing and a great sense of the elastic pulse of this kind of music. In other words, he powers the music along admirably, but compared with Moholo -- an unfair comparison for anyone -- he's less proactive, less individual. In such company, that hardly matters, since there's always plenty to listen to and Hauser never, ever gets it wrong. Maybe it's his own good taste which stops him pushing himself forward; whatever it is, the way he plays makes the session go like gangbusters.

Leimgruber, on the other hand, certainly has his own voice. There are superficial similarities with Parker, actually, especially in the way he plays rivers of notes, each of which seems to be chasing the tail of the previous one. His tone, however, is far more ascerbic than Parker's, with a biting squeal underlying it which can, at the group's most ferocious, feel a little like sucking a lemon. For much of the time, however, he plays a more ensemble role, which works admirably. Although that tone, especially on soprano, can sound rather weak (and off-pitch, as the soprano often is), Leimgruber's ideas more than make up for it. At times, too, that thinness of tone can work in his favour, as when he does a snake-charming routine a few minutes into "Part VI", making a neat reference to Middle Eastern music without hamming it up.

So this is nothing like the Parker quartet's album at all, really, despite identical instrumentation and the same free improv MO. Leandre and Crispell are very fine players indeed, and their partners here make up a very dynamic, very exciting quartet which sounds completely unlike Parker's equally exciting, and almost as dynamic recording. Quartet Noir do play at a higher energy level, and they feel led from the piano more than from the saxophone, but it's the individual musicians who really differentiate the two discs. A recommendation? Buy them both. They can't possibly disappoint.

Richard Cochrane

Libera Società di Improvvasazione: Al Màlaiko Noskèma

([Leo Lab](#): CD050)

Antonella Talamonti (direction), Vincenzo Appolloni, Alberto Berettini, Alessandro Campioni, Sandra Coronei, Patrizia De Ruvo, Daniela D'Ottavi, Manuela Giovannelli, Xavier Rebut, Filiò SotAntonella Talamonti (direction), Vincenzo Appolloni, Alberto Berettini, Alessandro Campioni, Sandra Coronei, Patrizia De Ruvo, Daniela D'Ottavi, Manuela Giovannelli, Xavier Rebut, Filiò SotAntonella Talamonti (direction), Vincenzo Appolloni, Alberto Berettini, Alessandro Campioni, Sandra Coronei, Patrizia De Ruvo, Daniela D'Ottavi, Manuela Giovannelli, Xavier Rebut, Filiò Sot~8

Luigi Onori identifies this music with surrealism -- without actually using the term -- in his informative but oddly elliptical sleeve notes. In fact, that mixture of the comprehensible and the elusive is at the heart of these very unconventional a capella improvisations. Nobody else in the world is making music quite like this, and yet it sounds as familiar as a folk song.

On first listen, it's hard to believe that everything is as freely improvised as the group's name suggests. The ensemble sound is so close, so disciplined, that an absence of predetermined densities, rhythms and melodic shapes seems unthinkable. Chants and shifting chords rise up almost simultaneously. Melodic lines flit from voice to voice, never seeming to falter. Yet even the language in which they sing is made up on the spot.

They call it "Lipit", a Joycean babble of Romance and Baltic languages (perhaps others too) developed on the fly but with a knowledge of what has been said before. As a result, it has a surprisingly coherent sound. Only one text, which is repeated in six different solo versions here, is completely predetermined, and these tracks have a very different feel -- much more like performances by actors than the conversational flow of the group pieces.

This is music which seems to have little jazz in it: its roots are firmly in European folk and choral traditions, put through much the same filter as Berio used to produce his *Coro*. This writer was particularly reminded of Central Asian musics on a couple of tracks, despite the fact that the singing styles are very Western. Likewise, it's possible to be reminded of African musics ("Orio Makai Toma") too.

So why surrealism? Well, this is no po-mo world music pastiche. This is music as C G Jung would have liked it: a structuralist's dream of incomprehensible meanings expressed through universal forms. While you might question the philosophy, you can't doubt the transcendent, glowing sound which results. Improvisers with a broad folk influence -- Evan Parker, let's say, since he gets a namecheck in the sleeve notes -- will marvel at the telepathic co-operation between these musicians, their commitment to the moment and their utopian subjugation to the group. Jung might say this was the universal archetypes manifesting themselves in their singing. I'll stick my neck out and say it's some damn fine jazz.

Richard Cochrane

London Improvisor's Orchestra: Proceedings

([Leo](#): CDLR279)

The 31-strong London Improvisers Orchestra (note the lack of apostrophe, like "Finnegans Wake") started life as Butch Morris's London Skyscraper, and the group has been playing together, with various personnel changes, for the last few years, looking for ways to make free improv work in a big group.

The pieces are nominally "composed" or conducted by one group-member, although the focus is, as might be expected, on improvisation, notwithstanding the fact that, like its close relative the London Jazz Composers' Orchestra, one could take theoretical issue with every word of its title. The composers on this three-CD set are Steve Beresford, Kaffe Matthews, Evan Parker, Dave Tucker, Caroline Kraabel, Simon H Fell, Phillip Wachsmann, Rhodri Davies, Chris Burn and Adam Bohman.

There are enormous dangers attached to getting involved with something like this, of course. For a start, large-group improv rarely works, for reasons anyone with any common sense can work out. Secondly, an "all-star" group like this one is bound to be a forest of egos treacherous to navigate, and who needs that kind of hassle? So it's maybe a pointer towards how important this project must have been -- at least to someone -- that it continued to run, and has now produced a recording.

It's a shame it isn't a better recording, really. Much of this music is murky and ill-defined in a way it's creators rarely are when in smaller groups. It's virtually impossible to tell the differences between pieces except by the crude mechanism of the "featured soloist". One is left thinking of the worst excesses of Third Stream pretentiousness, and shuddering.

Of course, this kind of work is well worth doing. Finding ways to make improv work in large groups is a challenge we rise to the way some people want to climb mountains or land on Mars. And some of the results are promising: Rhodri Davies's quiet "Wstrws" is a fine example. His notes make something clear before the track begins: there are no wailing sax sections here, and indeed the piece kicks against the tendency of this and most large groups towards big, muddy noises full of sound and fury but signifying precious little. His choice of the trumpets of Chris Burn and Matt Davis -- the latter rather a young lion of the scene, as it were -- as lead voices is inspired; both are quiet players, serious players, players who think while they blow and stop when their thoughts run dry. The rest of the group thrive within the discipline which this arrangement throws up.

Why don't more of the "composers" use tricks like this? Certainly, the noise of the band must be a powerful aphrodisiac, but sadly that great blaring sound is rather muted on CD, revealing the musical shortcomings of many of these tracks. Take Parker's conduction featuring Kaffe Matthews: the latter plays some cool enough sample-based stuff, but she doesn't need 30 other people wailing away intermittently; they just get in the way.

Maybe it's a good thing that big orchestras are expensive and small, intimate gigs aren't. It's hard to see how improvised music would ever have got off the ground if the economics of scale had been reversed. Many good people are involved with this project, and good things will surely come of it, or one like it, but these results are mixed in the extreme. Approach with caution.

Richard Cochrane

Ramon Lopez: Eleven Drums Songs

([Leo Lab](#): CD044)

Ramon Lopez (percussion)

Solo percussion albums: funny things. They look off-putting on paper, like a rock drum solo that goes on for an hour. Yet they can be hugely involving; a percussionist like Lopez is by no means tied to a trap set stool, and he uses a full range of sounds here to define the different pieces, though he shies away from tuned percussion.

Lopez has an unusual approach to rhythm which takes some getting used to. Mostly he eschews regular pulse in favour of a lurching fast-slow convulsion which, for example, has him alternating ride cymbal accelerandos with what-next pauses on "Drummers Remembered". His dynamics are delicately handled, too, as evidenced by a five-and-a-half minute performance focussed mainly on a pair of cowbells. No problems at a technical level, then, and his sense of drama is pretty accurate too. There are few "bald spots" and the music flows very convincingly. Lopez tends to use simple patterns to build and lend structure to these pieces, which are presumably improvisations on these initial ideas.

After a while, one hardly misses the presence of harmony or melody instruments here, in part because Lopez's setup for most pieces includes a number of instruments from the same family which give a rough element of melodic shape to the sound, but in part also because texture and rhythm provide interest enough. Sometimes -- as for example on "Beauty and the Best" -- these pieces sound like spectacular solos excised from a group performance, and then they are less successful. At others, Lopez manages to create a whole world and a piece of rounded music from his drums, as on the haunting membranophone-based "The Final Shroud". Percussionists will love this disk. Others should not be scared off, but are bound to approach with caution.

Richard Cochrane

Love Cry Want: Love Cry Want

(Newjazz.com, NJC001)

Nicholas (guitar, percussion), Joe Gallivan (percussion, steel guitar, moog), Jimmy Molneiri (percussion), Larry Young (organ)

Fusion threw up some weird hybrids in the margins around the Mahavishnu cult. One such was Love Cry Want, a regular trio of Nicholas, Gallivan and Molneiri augmented for this 1972 recording by Young's funky Hammond. Rhythmically-based, the music revels in jazzbo experiment and mystical hokum.

Larry Young is always value for money, and his contribution here lifts what might otherwise have been a rather immature fusion session. While Nicholas' solos are uneven, he's interesting enough and seems happy not to hog the limelight on an album which compares very favourably with what McLaughlin was doing at the time. His "prototype guitar synthesiser" is actually just a heavily processed electric guitar, and its sound is now creakily dated even while Nicholas urges the music into the space age.

The nearest comparator is probably what Abercrombie and Surman were doing in the same year -- a grainy, Coltrane-inspired jam which would quickly become unfashionable. Not of the same musicianly standards, this is a more quirky record, and a highly enjoyable one for that.

Richard Cochrane

Locatelli & Braidà: Diciannove Calefazioni

([Takla](#) : TAKLA2)

Giancarlo Locatelli (clarinets), Alberto Braidà (piano)

Very idiosyncratic and very beautiful improvisations by one half of the Takla Records collective, these nineteen pieces sound like nothing much else on the planet. Individual notes hang in the air; no particular statement lasts for long, and yet the duo manage to sustain a sense of momentum across the silences.

They've programmed unusually long pauses between the tracks, perhaps in an attempt to encourage the casual listener to hear distinct pieces. On in the background, these pointillistic, space-filled pieces really can all sound rather alike. Given attention, however, each one emerges with its own identity, and the separation of the pieces was a good idea in helping to encourage this kind of listening.

Braidà attacks his piano with a roughly equal dynamic on every note he plays here, or at least seems to. In reality, he has a neat way of playing the main notes at an even fortissimo and, between them, adding grace notes or echoic sounds at a very quiet dynamic level; he's a real pianoforte player, you might say. Although this is a bit of a simplification -- he plays extremely quietly throughout a few of these pieces, and he can pile the notes up when he wants to -- the tendency towards a homogeneous dynamic level is far stronger.

Locatelli has a similarly gnomic style. While on some of the pieces here he strings out a longer melodic line ("Caleidoscopio #2", for example), his most typical way of working is very much in tune with Braidà's. Leaving plenty of space between the notes or brief gestures, his lines hang together by only the most tenuous of connections.

Indeed, it's the way this duo make their music communicate across the rests which makes them so special. While each individual particle seems unremarkable, they combine into something which, in spite of everything, makes perfect sense. Uncompromisingly atonal and unmetrical, like a high-wire act without the wire, these pieces really ought to fail sometimes, but they simply don't. Partly this is down to their great sense of timing, partly their careful note-choice makes sense of an environment which has abandoned the usual structural markers. On its own, though, this wouldn't explain the fantastic music they make from such unyielding materials.

This disc is a triumph of an uncompromising vision shared by two musicians. Many would have cut these pieces with something more approachable; that would have been a mistake. Only in their undiluted form is it feasible to make sense of what they're up to, and it is certainly worth the effort. One is reminded of some of Braxton's sessions; there is that level of single-minded commitment about it. It virtually drips with importance, with the feeling of a distinctive voice emerging. Yes, one might compare it with Tippett and Shepherd's famous "66 Shades of Lipstick", and in places that comparison makes sense, but this is far more tightly-focussed than that record was. The casual listener won't get much out of these duets, but they repay the effort that they demand of you over and over again.

Richard Cochrane

Rene Lussier: Chronicle of a Genocide Foretold

([Ambiances Magnetiques](#))

Rene Lussier (composition)

Film scores often suffer from one problem: while a twenty-second cue on celluloid sounds fine, a string of them on CD can be extremely disjointed. The best film score CDs deal imaginatively with this problem, either developing the music and re-recording it or mixing it up with dialogue to create a filmic feel. The rest do what this one does: line up the cues end-to-end to produce a less-than-satisfying listen. Add to this the fact that the film in question is about the genocide in Rwanda (making rather facile comparisons with Hitler's Germany: well, that's thoughtful film-making for you) and you have a problem. While a film about Rwanda is by no means a bad idea, writing music about it seems pretty bathetic, like sticking a drawing pin in a whale.

Ignore the subject-matter and program out the short, go-nowhere tracks, and there's at least half a CD's worth of nice music here. The group has a cold, dissonant sound more often associated with Scandinavian composers, and Lussier's strangled guitar makes an occasional, welcome appearance. Ultimately, though, another case of lazily putting out whatever was recorded for the film, combined with too much emphasis on the "message" of the movie (which seems expected to carry over to the music), flaws the whole project.

Rene Lussier & Martin Tetreault: Dur Noyau Dur

([Ambiances Magnetiques](#))

Rene Lussier (guitar), Martin Tetreault (turntables, electronics)

Tetreault's electronics and turntable manipulations have the primeval sound of early IRCAM experiments; an unstable, glitching quality which gives these duets their edge. They are mostly short pieces -- averaging 2 minutes or so, the briefest just 11 seconds -- and this enables the pair to explore and experiment without risking the most common downfall of this kind of music, simply getting lost and boring the listener rigid. Lussier plays with great verve: on electric guitar he often blends with Tetreault, preferring abstract noise to notes, while on acoustic he takes a more conventional route, echoing Derek Bailey but sometimes even using a slide to create oblique country blues references.

Each piece has an identity of its own, mainly due to the range of sounds which both players create, though Tetreault is especially careful not to repeat himself too much here; this makes the whole that much more approachable. In duet terms, Tetreault can sometimes be overbearing, and there are times when the two appear not to be listening to one another, but that is not always so bad in this kind of music. Often enough, two different approaches emerge simultaneously and diverge; the listener must strain to follow their differing lines of argument until, some of the time at least, they converge again. This is an hour spent in intriguing company.

Richard Cochrane

Stefano Maltese: Living Alive

([Leo](#): CDLR265)

Stefano Maltese (reeds), Arkady Shilkloper (French horn, flugelhorn/bugle?), Sophia Dominacich (piano), Paul Rogers (bass), Antonio Moncada (percussion), Gioconda Cilio (voice, percussion)

Maltese is something of an outsider in Italian jazz, though it's hard to see why from this set of strong originals. It would be easy to give the impression that he's a bits-and-pieces player -- lambent, dark-toned lyricism, Tchicai-like ostinati, a melodic sense which can swing between early Garbarek and Evan Parker. Then suddenly he's reminding you of Dolphy; a player you could wear out your hyphen button with. But that would imply that these different facets aren't unified in a single musical vision. Well, they are. Everything he does makes perfect sense, from the serpentine melodies to the bass clarinet croaks and fragile soprano flutters.

Maltese is unprepossessing, thoughtful; Dominacich is a perfect accompanist in this respect. She infuses his compositions with the pale light they need, never over-stating or over-colouring anything. Moncada and Rogers complete an engine room which is tuned to perfection. Their duet section on "Dentro Il Vetro" is as free as any Guy/Lytton duel, and they have the jazz chops to work with Maltese's sinuous heads and muscular solos. Shilkloper is very much a second horn, but he plays beautifully on "Unreal City", and he's not so much under-utilised as understated. The temptation must be strong in such spacious, open music to plug up the gaps a little more, especially to a player of such obvious talents. Just as well he's too tasteful for such a faux pas; his quiet contribution is indispensable.

The other voice on this set is Gioconda Cilio's. Her appearance in these pieces often comes as a surprise, but while her solo sections take the group down much freer paths than they pursue with the other soloists, her contribution to the ensemble sound -- her comping, if you will -- is always logical and always adds something of real value. As a long-time collaborator with Maltese, she reveals a side of him which is not on show for most of this jazzy session.

For a set so airy, it's perhaps surprising how much high-energy playing is going on here. One certainly shouldn't get the impression that this is cool jazz. Maltese is a scalding altoist (he reminds this listener a little of Joseph Jarman) and Dominacich can turn up the temperature when she wants to. Even at these moments, though, something of that quiet intensity remains. As if, yes, this is loud and furious, but if these folks were to really let their hair down they'd blow your windows out. While it's nice to have to call in the emergency glazier once in a while, it's great to hear this more contemplative, and more contemporary-sounding side of free jazz too. Maltese is another fine discovery for which Leo Records must be congratulated.

Richard Cochrane

Joe Maneri Trio: The Trio Concerts

([Leo](#): CDLR307/308)

Joe Maneri (reeds, piano), Mat Maneri (violina, viola), Randy Peterson

Lantner/Maneri/Morris: Voices Lowered

([Leo](#): CDLR317)

Steve Lantner (piano), Joe Maneri (reeds), Joe Morris (guitar)

Leo Records has been central to the development of the reedsman who Cook & Morton wryly refer to as a 65-year overnight success. It's true that Maneri senior has spent most of his life as an unrecognised maverick, and that only in his autumn years has he garnered the critical acclaim he deserves. Leo issued two disks of the quartet which featured his son Mat and drummer Pederson way back in '93, when Maneri was a far from bankable name; so did HatArt, all of which two years before ECM cottoned on.

For those sessions the three were joined by a succession of first-class bass players (Lockwood, McBee, then Schuller), but as sleeve notes to both of these CDs point out, the trio is a great setting for the elder Maneri's music. Jaw-dropping though they are, the early Leo disks are also as impenetrable as a dense, prickly bramble hedge; the space a trio affords is most welcome.

These concerts were recorded back in '98; two gigs in Massachusetts captured in lovely clarity with a quiet but appreciative audience. Joe takes up the clarinet for the second half of disc 1, and even treats us to a little piano (an instrument on which he's surprisingly revealing, although it has less immediate impact than his saxophone) on disc 2, but otherwise discourses at length on alto or tenor, always in close duet with his son.

Mat Maneri has been working with his father since he was a teenager (and, informally, doubtless much longer), and their close understanding is always strongly evident. It's the common influences of cool jazz and Romanticism, the latter slightly tinged with Eastern European and Mediterranean folk musics, which really glues things together here, that and of course their long-worked-at ability to hear and anticipate one another.

Peterson really drops science in this setting, playing rhythms which are n levels removed from any putative pulse, but which make perfect sense, and the music as a result swings along effortlessly without ever sounding glib. He gets plenty of space, too -- two furiously inventive, at times baffling solos on "Balance + Pulse", neither of which is at all dispensable.

Mat Maneri's increasing use of electric violin is taking him ever further from the traditional gesturss of the jazz fiddle. Here he's reminiscent most of all of Bill Frisell -- of all people -- with his swelled-in chords, ambiguous and pithy. His very melodic side also gets ample room, but what's wonderful here as elsewhere is the counterpoint he creates with his father's tenor; and with Mat on baritone electric violin, even their timbres are closer than ever (one interesting aspect of Joe's playing is that he shows little interest in extremes of timbre, and plays for the most parts clean, clear notes).

The gravitas with which this double-CD is packaged enhances its status as an instant classic; the trio with Joe Morris is slightly more risky. There is no need to fear, however, as those who know [Mat Maneri's duet with Steve Lantner](#) will doubtless have guessed. (It ought to be pointed out that the trio material accounts for about forty minutes of music, with another twenty five of duos and solos, all featuring , which although good do pale a bit in comparison)

The pianist is a spikey, atonal player as far as one can tell, but that just puts Maneri, who studied with a pupil of Berg's, entirely at ease. Lantner, indeed, plays the piano a bit like Joe Maneri does, only with a sharpened sense of purpose and a lot more technique. A slight adjustment in rhythmic approach is audible here compared with the duos with the younger player, who enjoys a queasy rubato, whereas Maneri Snr has a more conventional (although by no means old-fashioned) free swing, not waxing and waning but driving, as it were. Lantner makes the shift effortlessly, perhaps even unconsciously, and the pair make a superb match.

This writer has expressed reservations about Morris before (not in these pages), but his playing is often superb on this recording. He does have a tendency towards superficial effect, but it's almost entirely overcome here in favour of a challenging communion with both partners. He takes a slightly less prominent position compared with the others, allowing him the luxury of interjecting and creating supportive lines which he does with great aplomb. His solos are still a bit widdly-diddly for this writer's taste, but that stuff really is subdued here in favour of co-operative trio playing of a very high order, and when Morris slows down and think about his notes he makes splendidly apposite decisions.

These two releases continue the admirable work Leo Records is doing to get the Maneri catalogue properly established. The Leo Maneris will eventually (perhaps not long from now) come to be viewed in the same way as the Leo Braxtons, Sun Ras, Taylors and Crispells. May there be many more to come, but until then, get the

Trio Concerts without delay. If it will save you anything in the postage, the trio with Lantner will be unlikely to disappoint either.

Richard Cochrane

Rhys Chatham: Hard Edge

([The Wire Editions](#): 9002-2)

Rhys Chatham (trumpet), Lou Ciccotelli (percussion), Gary Jeff (bass guitar, electronics), Gary Smith (guitar), Pat Thomas (guitar, electronics)

Marsh/Franklin/Crowther: Shell of Certainty

([Visionlogic](#): VLG101)

Steve Franklin (keyboards), Tim Crowther (guitar, guitar synth), Tony March (drums)

"Fusion" was a brave concept, but it's a word that, like its contemporaries "radical feminism" and "", has virtually become a term of abuse, one notch up from "progressive rock" on the scale of avant garde non-u descriptors. Well, here are two groups fearlessly re-opening that old case and asking, "Fusion: Can it be any good?"

Of course, everyone knows that fusion could be good when it wanted to. Groups like Larry Coryell's Eleventh House, not to mention critical avatars like Electric Miles and Early Mahavishnu, were good, awfully and undeniably good. It's not just about capturing the raw energy of rock and injecting it into jazz, and it certainly isn't always just a matter of making improvised music more accessible by watering it down.

Take Rhys Chatham's disc, which starts horribly but soon settles down into a drum-n-bass-fuelled psychedelic vibe. Yes, it's terribly 1996 (or whenever) and it's much more accessible with the rattling, repetitive beatz and screaming guitar solos than it would be without them, but it's not completely shallow stuff either. It has that murky haze which much down-dirty fusion of yesteryear had. Given the directions Miles was going in before he died, we'd be very lucky indeed if he'd made a record as interesting, edgy and unresolved as this one had he survived until today.

There are fun bits, too, like the Latin rhythm which creeps into "Dots" and threatens to turn the track into a muziq-style qu-easy listening tribute, or a tabla sample on "The Boiler" which, perhaps deliberately, recalls "On the Corner". Chatham isn't the most innovative of trumpet players, but he has a lot of Miles in his gestural, sometimes offhand approach which works perfectly in this setting. Smith is hardly the guitarist he seems to think he is, being something of a Vernon Reid (great on paper, disappointing in the ears), but he contributes to the overall sludge which this record very ably sloshes around in. Hard edged maybe, but the whole thing feels suitably rusted and mucky, with none of the gleaming polish of the West Coast.

Marsh/Franklin/Crowther could hardly be more different. They're a live, free improvising trio who just happen to use electronic and amplified instruments for their sound. This is a much more jazzy and much more free-improvised set, although the connection with work that guitarists like John Abercrombie were doing in the early 70s is still very strong.

March and Franklin have worked with a role-call of British free jazzers and improv merchants. Together, they make a boiling texture into which Crowther inserts his twiddly but thoughtful guitar. Much of this is extremely busy music, but it rarely flounders, and when the trio goes for a more aerated style, as on the alarmingly-entitled "Lemon Squealer", they strongly recall the "Larks Tongues in Aspic" period of King Crimson, with its spaced-out atonal jams.

It's not really meaningful to compare these two discs, but there's plenty to contrast. Chatham's set hammers along under the steam of high-velocity drum samples, while Marsh plays a far more flexible, free jazzy card. Aside from Chatham's trumpet, and occasional hot licks from Smith, "Hard Edge" goes for texture above note choice; Franklin and Crowther like to work with notes and bounce melodic and harmonic ideas around the place. They play live, and stress that there are "no overdubs", whereas Chatham's record is in part a studio construction. It fits in with The Wire's idea of what makes a record contemporary; Marsh and Co work with an idea of instrumental performance which you can find either antiquated or time-tested, depending on how you feel about that sort of thing. Both have their own pleasures, of course.

Richard Cochrane

Carlo Actis Dato: The Moonwalker

([Leo](#): CDLR311)

Carlo Actis Dato (reeds)

Edoardo Marraffa: Solo

([Bassesferec](#): BS005)

Edoardo Marraffa (tenor sax)

Two solo discs; one by an acknowledged master of the Italian music scene and one from a lesser-known name. Both, as it turns out, shy away from complete abstraction, turning often to quite traditional jazz concerns, although both are interested in the extended techniques of the avant garde. Both CDs take the view that playing solo doesn't have to mean rambling on for hours, which is a good thing. Here, as they say, the similarities pretty much end.

Dato's disk contains an astonishing 30 tracks, although this isn't quite as it seems because a third of them are tiny bits of found sound -- radio shots and field recordings -- which are presumably supposed to be redolent of some nonspecific third world country in which the reedsman would have us believe his roots can be found. It really is true that Dato is powerfully influenced by Middle Eastern and North African musics, but Indonesia? Japan? What have these to do with his music? One suspects they're there just to provide a whiff of the generically exotic. As decontextualised fragments they're certainly not musically very interesting, and they bear no discernable relation to what Dato is doing for the rest of the CD.

These interruptions aside, however, Dato turns in a disciplined set of brief performances here, almost all of them up-beat tunes with strong rhythmic components, very funky but also rather slight. One yearns to hear him develop the melodies a bit (which he only occasionally allows himself space to do) and, with such danceable material, he really seems to feel the absence of drums and a bass. Above all, one wants to sample these superb performances of very catchy tunes and give them some beef. Much as he may like the image of the street musician busking out songs in Marrakesh or Katmandu, the affectation isn't convincing and he'd be better off concentrating on the things which he can do extraordinarily well when the mood takes him. The playing here is of fine quality and no mistake, but the conception is flawed, marring some of the good work Dato puts into it.

Marraffa's album is bitty in a completely different way. His repertoire ranges from the extreme avant noise camp right through to a passable impersonation of Lester Young, so a vocabulary statement like this one is bound to be a bit varied. The more extreme stuff is, frankly, a bit posed and artificial-sounding, and Marraffa is, at times, certainly not in control of the things which come out of his horn. This willingness to push at the edge of his technique, however, can easily obscure the fact that he really can play, with a range of big, breathy tenor sounds, both straight and avant, which are both accomplished and rather personal. He does need some polish, but that will come; he already has bags of character, which is the hard bit, after all.

The straighter tracks are much more bizarre, but they do reveal one of his most distinctive qualities -- his preference for constructing quite long melodic ideas and punctuating them with silences. Put next to Dato's driving, riff-based style of playing, it's quite a contrast.

Inevitably, the most successful moments here are those when the two sides of the saxophonist's personality meet, as on the very impressive "Il Sogno Di Una Cosa", which fuses his smoochy jazz style with a set of articulations which resemble tearing metal. Lots of promising things here; Marraffa's is a name to look out for.

Richard Cochrane

Fabio Martini: Circadiana Clangori

([Leo Lab](#): CD045)

Fabio Martini (Bb clarinet), Giancarlo Locatelli (Bb clarinet, alto clarinet, bass clarinet), Massimo Falascone (alto sax, soprano sax, baritone sax), Serigio Notari (English horn), Marina CiccaFabio Martini (Bb clarinet), Giancarlo Locatelli (Bb clarinet, alto clarinet, bass clarinet), Massimo Falascone (alto sax, soprano sax, baritone sax), Serigio Notari (English horn), Marina CiccaFabio Martini (Bb clarinet), Giancarlo Locatelli (Bb clarinet, alto clarinet, bass clarinet), Massimo Falascone (alto sax, soprano sax, baritone sax), Serigio Notari (English horn), Marina CiccaFabio Martini (Bb clarinet), Giancarlo Locatelli (Bb clarinet, alto clarinet, bass clarinet), Massimo Falascone (alto sax, soprano sax, baritone sax), Serigio Notari (English horn), Marina Cicca~8

Martini hits the right metaphor when he calls this music "isobaric": its turbulence is certainly reminiscent of weather systems, and its logic-within-chaos has something of the cloud formation about it. The ten pieces on this disk and large group "compositions", though Martini's instructions were more in the way of vague but helpful directions to these performers drawn in equal parts from Italy's free jazz and experimental rock scenes.

These are high-energy works performed by ten musicians who may be unfamiliar to UK listeners but many of whom are audibly bursting with ideas. A cracking percussion solo which opens "Oster 28" shows Monico to be a force to be reckoned with, and Felascone demonstrates some astonishingly-controlled high notes as well as a nice solo on "Rouge". Throughout, Avogadri's guitar and Rantzer's bass provide a dynamic rattle and clatter out of which sublime things briefly flit.

In lots of ways, it would be nice to compare this music with Zorn's Cobra project, but that would probably give the wrong impression. Martini's concentration span is clearly longer than Zorn's, and rather than jump-cut collages these are much more conventionally flowing performances. They also have a more straightforward affective intent -- they are big, blusterin pieces, looming up on you like thunderclouds. Martini and his colleagues seem to prefer big gestures to elegant ones, shouting to whispering; his aesthetic is size, not economy. And that may be unfashionable, but there's nothing inherently wrong with it. "Hoo-Doo" and "De-finendo" are the only tracks which look like exceptions, with their halos of relative quietude, but even there a boiling shuffle underlies them, occasionally rising to the surface like something malevolent.

Richard Cochrane

Fabio Martini: Intrio

([Takla](#) : TAKLA3)

Fabio Martini (clarinets), Tito Mangialajo Rantzer (bass, first half only), Domenico Sciajno (bass, electronics, second half only), Carlo Virzi (percussion, first half only), Ruggero Radaele (percussion, second half only)

Two separate trio sets from one of Italy's best-kept secrets, reed player Fabio Martini. His [Circadiana Clangori](#) of last year proved him to be an interesting composer for a medium-sized ensemble of improvisors; here we find him in a much more intimate, and more exposed, setting.

Martini is a lugubrious player with a slow, deliberate sense of development. He seems to enjoy letting his notes swell and grow. Unlike so many free reedsmen, he doesn't feel the need to play fast and furious; his concern seems to be to keep the larger-scale musical movement underway, using long, languorous phrases. Not that his partners spend too much time filling in the details on either of these sessions; again, the emphasis is on thoughtful playing, not wild abandon.

Rantzer plays mostly with the bow, and his solo on "Effrazione" shows him to have a sinuous sound which is low on the rosiny squeak of so many bass players and high on -- again -- evolution and development. When he switches to pizzicato, it's to provide a solid anchor in this mostly unpulsed music, landing squarely on the accents every time with a diamond-hard touch. Virzi's contribution is so restrained as to seem almost odd at first. He seems to play individual beats, not riffs or fills; the result seems disjointed, and certainly isn't articulated in any conventional way, but it works in this setting. Like moss growing in your driveway, this trio has an inevitable, organic working-out which seems possible exactly because it happens at such a careful pace.

The second trio has, of course, some things in common with the first; at least inasmuch as Martini is the leader, and his approach hasn't changed a great deal. Radaele is, however, a much more ebullient percussionist than Virzi -- not loud, just busy, making a noisy-but-subdued backdrop to Martini's playing. Sciajno's electronics help him out, too. This pair's favoured method isn't the single, isolated sound but the continuous scratch and rattle, out of which important things occasionally emerge.

The difference in approach is clear from the opening. Sciajno has more of a basis in extended techniques than Rantzer displays on the foregoing session, and the overall feel has more in common with other rhythm sections on the cusp of free improv and free jazz. Sciajno takes some very nice solos (on "The Red Tent", especially) in which he really seems to revel in the bass's bottom register. It's not extremely hectic playing, but it's distinctly more hectic than the first half of the disc, and the most obvious example is the wild (and short) "Popgun", which sounds distinctly like a Parker/Lytton/Guy piece.

This is certainly a game of two halves, but there's enough continuity of expression between the two to let them flow together as well as marking a join (there's something Deleuzian in this) so as to prevent it from merely being broken-backed. Fifty seven minutes is nowhere near long enough to get tired of Martini's ever-intelligent, almost discursive clarinet. The two rhythm sections give the disc an added degree of variety (and the device gives Takla a chance to show off more of its talent to us non-Italians) but either of these trios could have carried it off alone. More, please.

Richard Cochrane

Various Artists: The Kakutopia Annual Report

([Unsound Automatic](#): UACD015)

Homo-Genetic Arsonist: The Proverbial Flaming Domicile

([Unsound Automatic](#): UACD014)

Mig Harries (vocals, guitar, drums), Peredur Gwladus (bass), Manwell Greig (keyboards), Dafydd Harries (keyboards), Rick Dragger (drums, vocals)

Master Class: Mindgarden

([Unsound Automatic](#): UACD009)

Derrug Claptona (guitar, vocals), Fred Bansen (keyboards, vocals), Bo "Porn" Craddock (drums), Baru Harrison (bass), Dawn craddock (keyboards)

Those bonkers boys from Kakutopia (aka Unsound Automatic) are back again, with what promise to be the last two proper album releases on the label and the second of their "annual reports", compilations which they intend to continue releasing however nicely we ask them not to.

Actually, it's hard -- but important -- not to treat these guys as a comedy outfit. Much of this material is silly, yes, and some of it is very funny. Take Gwilly Edmondez -- almost certainly a Welsh-Hispanic alias of Will Edmondes -- performing his touching "Plugs (for Emma)". One imagines him sitting on a bar stool with a tight spotlight and a guitar on his lap, the sensitive singer-songwriter about to perform a favourite ballad. Except that the playing is all pinging, off-key wrongness and the vocals consist entirely of burps.

Yet elsewhere on what can only be described as a very healthy annual report which is bound to please the shareholders, there are some really cool tracks which transcend plain (but to-be-encouraged) silliness. "Serious" electronic composer Richard Bowers, whose [Nocturne](#) received plaudits from (musings) last year, appears here again with the excellent "Succubus"[\[note\]](#), which packs a lot of music into eight and a half minutes and sounds much like an electronically-manipulated Ligeti. He also appears as producer of the pleasingly in-your-face SAAB

Under the banner of Kak (from "cack", meaning crap, rubbish) the group appears to have attracted some really cool bedroom fastracker music makers. Abel Aabab puts forward the extremely cool "Notte Santa", a track which David Shea would be proud of. Gwilly Edmondez returns with the brilliantly-named "Helen & Wendy -- Two Women", which turns out to be a nice (but too short) piece of swirling electronica. The guys at The Wire go wild over this sort of stuff. Tony Gage is obviously a clever composer who plays deliberately stupid (actually, it seems they all are), and "Frank's Breakfast" is a nice juxtaposition of "proper" atmospheric piano playing, cruddy guitar noodles and some dialogue from a 1950s movie.

Meanwhile, the traditional face of Kak, with its cruddy mum's-garage guitar dins and silly lyrics, can still be seen about the place. Tony Gage fuses his synth stylings (yes, "stylings") with some kak rock to pretty cool effects, while the aptly-named Slowband lazily rumble through some Beefheart territory. Surviv use tinny drum machines to approximate a sort of Skinny Puppy goth-techno which you can make at home for less than your giro money. Pukus (another good name) have a cool Hendrixian guitarist but only one little condenser mike, resulting in a nasty bootleg-quality recording, although the track is called "Hur Spittle", which is some compensation.

Psychedelic Spazstic Hamster's "Die Motherfucker" would sound very much like a candidate for kak. Instead, however, it provides four minutes of pure genius. It's a towering piece of trip-hop ranting filtered through school rock band sounds and re-fried in the "studio" (ie someone's bedroom) into a menacing but nigh-on dancable slab of, well, funk.

As for the album releases, Master Class sound very much like Radioactive Sparrow, and unless they actually are Radioactive Sparrow with different names ("Derrug Claptona"? We don't think so) then this is -- and how can one put this without it sounding hugely unlikely? -- they're very much derivative of the Rads. "Beautiful Noise -- Experimental Band" may be a good gag reminiscent of King Missile's less Kak "Sensitive Artist", but if they'd been around at the time they'd have been picked for the role of the band who live below the protagonist of "Driller Killer", making his subsequent killing spree all the more psychologically believable. But go and see them live, if they ever come your way, because their gigs are probably a riot.

Homo-Genetic Arsonist's second CD wins the controversial (muusings) Album Title of the Millennium award, and there's as much to enjoy here as on ["Fuck Theory"](#), his first release. It starts well, with Harries singing with a mouthful of water (or something), and it just stays on pretty much that level throughout. It's all a bit less edgy

than the first album, but Harries isn't setting himself up as a joke for adults to laugh at (for those who don't know, he's a schoolboy). His intentions seem quite serious, although he has a far more mature sense of what that means than the self-indulgent bands people like this writer were involved with at that age. The packaging of these releases has improved, too, and this is an object you'll be proud to own, in contrast with his previous release which was horribly (but appropriately) ugly.

If you only buy one rubbish record this year, make it Kakutopia's annual report. It's not "so bad it's good", but good despite having all the odds against it. Maybe they intended to make it crap and got it wrong. Maybe. One suspects not. In a nutshell, they've created a unique missive from a musical hinterland nobody seems to care about.

"Succubus" uses recorders as a primary sound-source; Martin Archer's most recent release, "Winter Pilgrim Arriving", also features recorders. And before hearing about either of these projects, this writer started working with recorders too. What was in the water around the middle of last year?

Richard Cochrane

Vincenzo Mazzone: Ping Pong

([Leo Lab](#) : CD056)

Vincenzo Mazzone (percussion), Antonio Di Lorenzo (percussion), Lello Patruno (percussion), Giuseppe Tria (percussion), Giuseppe Berardi (percussion), Maurizio De Robertis (percussion), Ivan Mancinelli (percussion), Domenico De Palma (percussion), Simone Salvatorelli (percussion), Daniele Patumi (bass), Carlo Actis Dato (reeds), Giorgio Occhipinti (piano), Sandro Satta (alto sax), Pino Minafra (trumpet), Lauro Rossi (trombone)

A bit of an oddment, I suppose -- 20 minutes of music for nine percussionists, fifteen in the company of the famous Sud Ensemble, and the remaining twelve solo. The common link is Mazzone, not just by his presence at the trap set or kettle drums but also as composer and arranger.

Perhaps Mazzone's solo pieces which conclude the disc are a sensible place to start. His kit playing is impressive if not dazzlingly different, his tribute to Max Roach well-observed without being pointlessly authentic. In fact, Mazzone's conception of time feels quite different from Roach's, so the piece works rather well. On these tracks, we hear him exploring his relationship with the jazz tradition, and while they're technically and often musically very clever, they're hardly hard-line vocabulary statements. Instead, they mark the subtleties which give Mazzone his own sound, and as such are valuable.

Only on his last solo outing, using overdubbed bongos and timpani, do we get a feel for Mazzone's overall conception, niceties of swing aside. It's orchestral and dramatically large-scale. While he's an extremely able and knowledgeable jazz drummer, Mazzone is most himself when directing powerful forces in slow-moving, ostinato-based settings. That's the Roach connection -- his ability to swing complex rhythmic units against each other to create musical tension is uncommonly honed.

So, in a sense, it's this last track which can lead us into the first, and so into the opening of the ambitious "Genesi 2" for nine percussionists. Like George Russell, another composer who's attracted to big themes, Mazzone has composed a piece about the beginnings of the universe. How this programme ties in with the music itself isn't too clear, except in the simplest (and probably best) of ways -- it's bombastic and impressive, and it has an arch-like dynamic structure which I suppose represents the cycle of birth and death. Mazzone uses much straighter rhythms than one might expect -- Latin, jazz and classical metrical structures rub shoulders with the less frequent abstract passages. The movement entitled "Venere" even re-works Strauss's timpani which depicted the dawn of human life in "Also Sprach Zarathustra". This writer isn't completely convinced the piece has much formal coherence, nor that all nine players were strictly necessary, but it's an enjoyable ride nonetheless.

As for the Sud Ensemble track, which stands out oddly on this disc, Mazzone and Minafra have worked together since the mid-seventies, so the presence of the latter's earth-shaking septet is hardly a surprise. Mazzone's composition for this Mediterranean Art Ensemble of Chicago is joyous, jazzy and riddled with spaces for Minafra, Actis Dato and Satta to do their things. It's immensely enjoyable -- a whole disc of this material, if that much exists, would have been welcome -- and, again, reminiscent at times of George Russell, although for different reasons.

Mazzone is clearly a talented composer. The Sud Ensemble piece is fun and attention-grabbing; "Genesi 2" is a serious piece but by no means a po-faced one. This isn't difficult material, indeed it's about as accessible as unpitched percussion gets, but the complexities some of these rhythms set up go deeper than a casual listen would have you believe; frequently what sounds like a real foot-tapper will defy actual foot-tapping. As a whole this disc doesn't really hang together, but as an insight into what this musician -- who's little-known outside Italy -- can do, it's certainly to be commended.

Richard Cochrane

Rajesh Mehta: Orka

([Hatology](#) : 524)

Rajesh Mehta (trumpet), Paul Lovens (percussion)

Rajesh Mehta Collective 3+: Window Shopping

([True Muze](#): TUMUCD9802)

Rajesh Mehta (trumpet), Felicity Provan (trumpet, voice), Alan Purves (drums), Paul Southamer (cello), Tom Fryer (guitar)

You see him on the cover of the Hatology solo/duet disc, blowing into a pair of trumpets connected by plastic tubing. Oh dear, you think; a gimmick. But listen to "Not Yet", and the viability of the instrument becomes surprisingly clear, even if the precise mechanics remain mysterious. Playing a delicate but almost monotonous line on the horn at his lips, Mehta is able to interject harmonisations, rhythmic stabs and ostinati into the piece, making a simple and unpromising solo part glisten

Mehta, then, is no ordinary trumpet-player. His "hybrid trumpet", visually bewitching as it is, is just the beginning. He has a huge range of extended techniques, paraded to the full on Orka, from delicate microtonalities to the steam-engine sounds which are becoming part of the trumpet's new vocabulary. Still, Mehta is only partly interested in showing off his chops. He's also there to make music, and fine music it is too. It ranges from the Indo-Arabic title track with its repeating melodic cells and additive rhythms, through the piercing delicacies of "Difftones" to "Leslie's Plumbing", with its grainy abstraction.

The solo pieces on this disc are revealing, but the duets with Lovens are more numerous. The drummer plays a textural role and, while the sleeve notes are right to deny a traditional melody/rhythm division between the two players, for the most part the percussionist takes a back seat. That's fine; this is Mehta's show, and as an introduction to his playing it makes a strong impression.

Even stronger, perhaps, is the impression he makes in a group setting. Playing solo, as long as one has the chutzpah and the ideas, is one thing -- forming a group to play your compositions is quite another. Mehta, although brought up in the United States and now resident in Europe, was born in Calcutta, and he brings an affinity for Karnatic music to the Collective 3. Hence, his approach to composition is rather skewed from the expected head arrangements.

Take "Revolving Doors", composed as it is of a series of melodic cells which may be played in any order, embellished, and used as improvisational jumping-off points. The piece has a modal feel (although it isn't) and the trio, because they are working from shared materials which are never openly stated, sound as if they all spring from some obscure micro-tradition. It's an effective approach.

This is the only trio piece on the disc, but the two trumpets and the wonderfully literate drumming of Alan Purves form the core of the others. Paul Southamer's cello takes an excellent solo on "Nagaraja", a tune structured in a rather Hindustani manner; it even begins with an elaboration of the melody in alap and gat. He also provides great ensemble support throughout. Guitarist Tom Fryer, meanwhile, sounds oddly like an avant garde John Scofield. He has a pinched tone and a very funky sense of time on the frankly bizarre "Grublein", where he proves he can mix it up with the best of them in the freer passages, too.

Mehta is a player who, without exoticising the Indian influence, manages through it to being something very distinctive to his playing and, in particular, his compositions. As a soloist he is sure-footed; in duet with Lovens he interacts with his partner but has the confidence to take the wheel (Lovens, to his credit, has the confidence to let him, too). In the trio and larger groupings, his compositions really come to the fore, and his ability to forge a unique sound is given free reign. These two discs, then, give a very convincing account of Mehta's talents. "Window Shopping" is particularly recommended, though trumpet-freaks will find "Orka" essential, too. Doubtless he has a few more tricks up his sleeve yet; a player -- and a group -- to watch.

Richard Cochrane

Middletown Creative Orchestra

10.6.97 ([Newsonic](#): newsonic6)

Jenna Alden (tenor sax), Josh Blair (percussion), Dan Gilbert (electric guitar), Jesse Kudler (theremin), Rachel Thompson (viola), David Novak (bassoon, melodica), Johnathon Zorn (bass), Seth Dillinger (electric guitar), Jackson More (alto saxophone), Eric Ronick (melodica, piano), Anne Hege (flute), James Fei (bass clarinet), Seth Misterka (alto sax), Rafael Cohen (oboe), Peter Cafarella (accordion), Karen Correa (viola)

4.11.98 and 4.30.98 ([Newsonic](#): newsonic9)

Seth Dillinger (voice, objects), Edward Kasperek (percussion), Richard McGhee (soprano sax), Seth Misterka (alto sax), Jackson Moore (reeds), Jessica Pavone (viola), Amanda Youngman (clarinet), Johnathon Zorn (bass, accordion, slide whistle), Jenna Alden (tenor saxophone), Josh Blair (percussion), Peter Cafarella (accordion, piano), Josephine Conover (viola), Dan Gartner (voice, piano), Anne Hedge (voice), Chris Jonas (tenor saxophone), Jesse Kudler (electric guitar, objects), Juliana Mastrunzio (voice), Phloyd Starpoli (trombone), Yosuke Oshima (oboe)

Crystal Lake ([Newsonic](#): newsonic12)

Marc Burns (keyboards), Peter Cafarella (accordion), Rafael Cohen (oboe), Seth Dillinger (bass), Van Green (bass), Edward Kasperek (percussion), Jesse Kudler (theremin), Chris Matthey (trumpet), Richard McGhee (reeds), Seth Misterka (alto sax), Jackson Moore (reeds), Jessica Pavone (violin), Phloyd Starpoli (trombone), Dortha Willets (dulcimer), Johnathon Zorn (viola)

The MCO are a loose collective of Connecticut musicians moving in the orbit of Wesleyan university, at whose centre, of course, is the considerable gravitational body of Anthony Braxton. Some of these players have collaborated with Braxton, many have studied with him, and surely all have heard and been influenced by him. What's surprising, then, is how little their music sounds like any of the great man's many voices.

The Orchestra essentially works within the genre of "compositions for improvisors". These are large-scale pieces, and certainly these CDs give the impression that the scale is only growing: "10.6.97" fits in four pieces, the second disc has two and by the time of "Crystal Lake", the eponymous track is the only track. In fact, "Crystal Lake" is a medley (if one can have a medley in avant garde music; I suppose one can) of six pieces, ranging from the fully-notated to the completely improvised, but the continuity between them and the obvious intention of fusing them into a single piece is evident and the different pieces are not indexed on the CD.

This preference for the long form is just one of the many elements of their music which makes it initially forbidding. Another is the sheer ugliness of their sound-world. They like to work with extreme dissonances for sustained periods, combining them with bludgeoning rhythms at volumes which must, live, threaten their audience with tinnitus. Combining these sounds with untutored, sometimes agonised vocal sounds just makes things that bit more off-putting.

It's this combination which makes their first recording a bad place to start, even though the shorter tracks make attentive listening easier. Once their language makes some more sense, the austere, lumpen appeal of, say, "7.XX.97" begins to look less like deliberate perversity and more like, say, a Max Ernst drawing, but as a first experience it's potentially disastrous. Actually, what's interesting about this disc is that it's the most minimalist of the three. Far from the tonal cycles of the 60s school, the MCO's use of repeated blocks of sound has a genuinely individual flavour. It makes "7.XX.97" the highlight of this disc, but "Recursive Structure for Orchestra" uses similar material in a more open-ended setting (difficult to grasp but, oddly, hard to turn off before it's finished) and the opening "Drone Generator" creates interesting music from gradually shifting but extremely grainy textures.

"4.11.98 and 4.27.98" starts proceedings with a pounding, Stravinskian rhythm and more shouting. The voices continue to pop up throughout this, the most jazzy of their recorded tracks -- unlike the deranged noises which spring up on "Light Switch", these have a link to Mingus and, thence, back into the circus and minstrel show in which jazz was born. Still, this is a long way from "Goodbye Pork Pie Hat". Sounding like an orchestra of schizophrenics mixing up the brassy raunch of the Broadway striptease pit band with Kurt Weill and Stockhausen, "4.11.98" refines, re-processes but essentially re-visits the ideas which characterised the previous disc.

The second track on this release (guess what? They called it "4.27.98") is twice as long but appears to use some of the same material. It's equally ecstatic in places but also, as the length implies, a little more leisurely, replacing some of the brashness with cooler passages. On both tracks -- but particularly this second one -- the group's repetitive approach is focussed on ostinati played by individuals or small groups, rather than the whole orchestra marshalling massive blocks of sound. Over forty minutes it can be a little unrelenting, but given full concentration it's involving even if it's unpopular at dinner parties.

"Crystal Lake" is probably the Orchestra's most developed performance on disc, although the line-up is very different and so comparisons are probably not so enlightening and the retention of the name might suggest. Some of the elements are still present: the combinations of minimalism and maximalism, improv and composition, unrestrained vocals and advanced instrumental techniques. Yet the sound here is so much more

polished, so much richer, that the beast seems almost tamed. There were benefits to the older orchestra, of course, because that boiling energy can carry a piece along nicely, but "Crystal Lake" feels like a quantum evolutionary leap.

I don't want to give the impression that the fire has gone out of the Orchestra's belly. It may simply be that the greater variety of instrumental colours lends it a less muddy sound, but the multitude of simultaneous events seems cleaner and more thought-out in this performance. While the second disc is a good starting-point for those coming to the Orchestra from free jazz, and "10.6.97" might be a suitable introduction for Borbetomagus freaks, "Crystal Lake" is a showcase for the new MCO and show them off it certainly does.

The MCO's music can be shockingly brutal, but if you can handle the external nastiness, there's a lot going on in all of these pieces. While nobody gets to grandstand for long, the standard of musicianship is clearly pretty high, and the single-minded determination to play such thankless stuff is intriguing in itself. Recommended to those who don't mind getting their ears dirty.

Richard Cochrane

The Middletown Three: Nine Compositions

([Newsonic](#): newsonic8)

[Seth Misterka](#) (alto sax, electric guitar), Jackson Moore (reeds), [Jonathon Zorn](#) (bass)

A very spikey sound-world indeed from these three members of the [Middletown Creative Orchestra](#). As with close relation [CCM4](#), which also features Misterka, composition and improvisation both have roles to play, and the end result is something perfectly idiosyncratic.

Misterka and Moore take similar routes with the saxophone: a gestural, wild and very vocalised style which tends to be extremely loud and not terribly subtle. There are more melodic moments here, and more timbrally sensitive ones, but generally this duo are about brute force, putting their money into sheer red-faced yelling as a source of energy, particularly in the improvised sections. It works, if you like that sort of thing. At their most excitable, the pair can just sound like they're trying too hard, but when the heat is turned down a little their scrappy frog-chorus produces some nice moments. These are pretty good listeners trapped in a style which is so atavistic as to preclude real interaction.

Not that this is free jazz, anyway; although a jazz influence is clearly discernable, these pieces have far more in common with contemporary composition and even rock. Yet that distant, chilly quality which they share with the [Remote Viewers](#) in the UK is something different, something deriving perhaps from electronic music. The desire seems to be to play with timbral complexity without allowing these extended techniques to become expressive. Even the vocalised wails of the reeds stand oddly alone, abstract gestures rather than references to the human voice.

Zorn's contribution is far more valuable than a third saxophonist's would have been. He lends variety and even a certain levity to the proceedings, and often a sense of order, too. When the horns are waffling and squealing together, one can sometimes discern a slow, careful texture being drawn beneath by Zorn's bow. It's a great help. Those curious about his playing style, however, would be better advised to check out his [solo album](#), since here he gets precious little space.

This is certainly an uncomfortable listen, and perhaps that's a point in its favour. Many of the compositions are interesting, and in some cases ("Arbutus", for example) the arrangements are imaginative too. Misterka and Moore share enough common ground to bounce off one another successfully, but the overall effect is ascerbic in the extreme with little to offset its awkwardness. Only for those who know they like this sort of thing.

[Richard Cochrane](#)

Phil Minton: A Doughnut in Both Hands

([Emanem](#): 4026)

Phil Minton (voice)

Minton's voice is a rich baritone tortured by horrible nightmares; a singing Goya consumed by something unspeakable. So what's odd is that there's no sense of darkness about this music. It's not meant to remind you of a body in extremis, gurgling and crying out and roaring with pain, it just does. Seeing him performing live is akin to watching a medium in a sideshow seance, as he rocks back and forth on a stool, tossing his head as if unable to get comfy and seeming in constant danger of falling over entirely and being consumed by some kind of spasm which creeps out of his lungs and slowly along his limbs. Then, quite casually, he'll reach out for his pint and smile at someone in the audience.

Minton's techniques are too many and various to categorise. There's everything here from overtone singing of the most exotic kinds right through yodelling to childish or animalistic noises. "Wood Song Two" somehow sums him up; the deep, gurgling voice of a child impersonating some kind of ogre employed in the services of a lovely, probably composed melody. Some of these effects are funny, some frightening, but all are very musical.

If Minton played a saxophone, it would be easier to listen to his music. It's the fact that the voice is being so roundly abused that's disturbing, because these extreme sounds are associated with non-musical situations, with screams and death rattles, the sore-throat singing of drunks and the babbling of lunatics. That detracts, but it adds something too. It detracts because it's impossible to focus "purely" on the music. What it adds is the reason for that distraction. Minton's music, unlike so much free improvisation, is about something. What, exactly, is a big question, but his appropriation of the sounds of madness and, above all, suffering for the purposes of making joyously liberated music is at its centre.

Whatever Minton means as a performance artist -- if anything -- he's a musical force to be reckoned with. This writer admits to preferring the slightly more conventional earlier (1975) tracks on this disc than those from the early 1980s, which show a much more extreme figure emerging, but that more extreme figure is what Phil Minton, really, is all about. Perhaps most successful of all are the two performances of Lou Glandfield's lovely and hilarious "Psalm of Evolution". They're accomplished, funny, scary, disturbing performances which sum up much of what the singer does, if only with a fraction of the techniques he has available.

Richard Cochrane

Misere et Cordes: Au Ni Kita

([Potlatch](#): P101)

Pascal Battus, Emmanuel Petit, Dominique Repecaud, Camel Zekri (guitars)

Diaz-Infante and Forsyth: Wires and Wooden Boxes

([Pax](#): EE03/PR90252)

Ernesto Diaz-Infante, Chris Forsyth (guitar, piano, little instruments)

Manuel Mota: For Your Protection Why Don't You Just Paint Yourself Real Good Like An Indian

([Headlights](#): H04)

Manuel Mota (guitar), Margarida Garcia (bass)

If among the instruments of free improvisation the saxophone is still the king, the guitar is surely its impatient prince. It's an instrument which lends itself to preparation, modification, manipulation and other sorts of abuse; it attracts disaffected rockers, folk musicians and punks like the sax draws jazzers. As a result, guitar-driven projects like those represented on these three disks are often quite different in flavour from reed-based ones.

Misere et Cordes (not the best band name of all time, but no matter) are a quartet which aims to encompass the whole range of the instrument: classical, acoustic, electric and "surrounded". One assumes (and this is only an assumption) that the latter is either heavily modified or played flat on a tabletop with a variety of instruments; either way, the sounds this conjures up are the sounds of the album as a whole.

These are guitars as sound-sources and, although there is (as there always is) some conventional technique lurking under the surface, there are few notes or chords and certainly none which function as such. Zekri adds some rudimentary electronics into the mix, but otherwise the sound is dominated by the now-familiar clicks, bangs, clanks, scrapes, squeaks and rattles of this vocabulary.

The pieces, as you might expect, are pretty formless. There are good bits -- the second half of "Argyl", for example, pits the guitarists very sparsely against either Zekri's electronics or Repecaud's electric guitar -- but there are also those inevitable bits which have you wondering where they're going. Fans of this percussive, tactile style of guitar-playing will find things to enjoy here, although it probably won't win any converts. This writer would have preferred a more textured approach, with more disciplined deployments of light and shade. Lovers of the noisier, less organised end of improv will like it better, and there are undoubted high points.

Diaz-Infante and Forsyth's album inhabits a similar sound-world, and a very different one from their [impressive first disk](#), which was as dense with sound as a Caspar Brotzmann set. These, on the other hand, are free improvisations in the most stagey sense, explorations of the sonic possibilities offered up by a studio containing not only their guitars but also a piano, a piano soundboard and a variety of other objects.

Although stylistic differences between this duo and Misere et Cordes are slight, the duo format immediately makes the music less dense and more inviting, exposing details which the sheer layeredness of the quartet all too often obscures.

Most of the disk is taken up with duets between Diaz-Infante's acoustic guitar and Forsyth's electric. As might be imagined, the disparity between the two instruments invites comparisons with the rich pageant of guitar timbres offered by Misere et Cordes, but in fact the two are closer in sound than that suggests; indeed, it's often difficult to separate them despite the fact that they play quite distinct instruments. The tendency to explore textures at length which the quartet eschews is exploited to the full here, and although this makes the music relatively less full of incident, it does render it more approachable.

There are also three tracks featuring other instruments, but again, because of the extremely non-standard approaches taken to them, they tend to blend in with everything else. There's none of the subtleties of Diaz-Infante's piano compositions here; it's all percussion, at some times furiously active, at others so quiet as to force you to strain to hear. These contrasts help give the music large-scale shape, but the details are as impenetrable as those presented by the quartet discussed above; like theirs, this is thorny music which bristles with energy even at its quietest.

Forsyth is not the most technically interesting guitarist to listen to; he often sounds scribbly and gestural, as if making big movements to get his sound. Still, though, what he plays is interesting, and sometimes (the opening of "Pulled Wires", for example) he finds interesting conventional notes and shapes in his determinedly primitive technique. One can wish for more of them, but that misses his point, it seems. Diaz-Infante remains an

interesting and rather enigmatic multi-instrumentalist, and improvising isn't the only thing he does or even, necessarily, the thing he's best at. Still, the pair turn in a focussed set here.

Manuel Mota is the most conventional of the players represented here, in the sense that he's interested in melodic lines within a free jazz framework. He sounds as if he's playing over-amplified and trying to be quiet, which is an interesting approach that can lead him into nice choices of articulation (it's much easier to talk about this kind of music, you see; the frames of reference are readily available, whereas for the other disks discussed here they're ambiguous, still half-formed and entirely controversial).

Here as on his previous CD he's working with excellent electric bassist Garcia. They share an aesthetic founded in conventional notes-playing but acutely aware of timbre. Her work is subtle, even secretive, but it makes a big impact, and helps sustain Mota's soloistic approach.

That's not to say that this is fiddly, note-heavy jazz guitar; Mota is infinitely closer to Sonny Sharrock than Frank Gambale. Above all of the guitarists he's most like, he's most like Joe Morris, but he has a much more risky tone which makes him much less impersonal than Morris can be. This is often quiet, understated free improvisation which retains links with jazz; Mota and Garcia as a duo certainly deserve wider recognition.

Richard Cochrane

Gregor Hotz: Solo

(FMP: OWN90012)

Gregor Hotz (reeds), Nicholas Bussman (cello)

Urs Leimgruber: Blue Log

([For4Ears](#): CDNR1137)

Urs Leimgruber (saxophones)

Seth Misterka: MOH

([Newsonic](#): 17)

Seth Misterka (saxophones, samples)

Too many of them there may be, and unapproachable they often feel, but there are times when only an ascetic solo saxophone album will do. Here are three very recent releases from artists you may or may not have heard of. There's Hotz, who's played sideman to Fuchs, Lacy and Koch; Leimgruber, whose quartet album with Marilyn Crispell was [reviewed](#) in the last edition; and finally there's Misterka, whose work with the [Middletown Creative Orchestra](#), [CCM4](#) and other groups will be known to regular readers.

Both Hotz and Leimgruber take a traditional, "vocabulary statement" approach, the latter much more than the former. Although both used "extended techniques" very heavily, Leimgruber's disc is by far the more virtuosic-sounding, and each piece draws some of its coherence from the fact that it focuses on a small and unique technical range; Leimgruber virtually uses timbre like Sonny Rollins used melody, as a source of constant, effervescent invention within a restricted orbit.

Hotz does take this sort of approach -- on "Mondo Cane", for example, he tries submerging his bass horn while playing it, something which sounds okay enough, although anyone who's listened to a lot of Lacy or Zorn will have heard it before. He's most effective, though, when he puts these kinds of ideas aside and simply pursues a stream of consciousness. The results are low-key and not, initially, very involving, but they're worth sticking with.

Leimgruber grabs you immediately and ensures that, at every moment, he has your full attention. Sometimes we need that, especially when he has such enjoyable ways to make good use of the attention got thereby. Hotz is a little more diffident, and doesn't seem to mind whether you listen or not. It can sound like a bedroom tape at times, but much of the music here is surprisingly imaginative once you let it get hold of you.

Hotz has Bussmann on the final third of the disc, which is an odd strategy because it makes the album look broken-backed before it's even out of the cellophane. There's a good fifty minutes of solo stuff here anyway, and it's hard to see what tacking these duets on the end was intended to achieve. They're nice enough, but the sleeve notes' claim that these two musicians share the same vocabulary isn't borne out by what's here. Bussmann is a pretty straight cellist, working mainly with long, bowed tones or rhythmic ostinati while Hotz takes solos. Both play well, but one yearns for a more dynamic rhythm section which would really stretch the reedsman so we could see what he's really made of.

Leimgruber's disc is shorter than the solo section of Hotz's, but it packs a terrific punch. As ever with such things, the insert assures us that there were no overdubs involved, and so Leimgruber's can-it-be-for-real techniques must be for real after all. Albums like this can be terribly tedious, and I suppose that someone with no interest at all in saxophone technique might find it a bit of a drag, but Leimgruber pushes his wildly eccentric vocabulary in some satisfyingly musical directions. The end results are consistently listenable assuming, as always, you like that sort of thing; and this disc has moments which are eye-bogglingly impressive both technically and musically.

Seth Misterka's solo disc is the shortest of the lot, and the least overtly serious-minded. While Hotz and Leimgruber -- quite properly -- try to boil down their musical conceptions in this most exposed of formats, Misterka layers percussion, electronics and other bits and bobs alongside his sax in an overtly overdubbed manner. The results are fun, and there are even tunes, which may come as a surprise to those who know Misterka as the hardcore modernist behind [CCM4](#).

The compositions -- for compositions they are -- are lumpy and distinctly badly-behaved. "Pizza Pete" sounds like it's barging through a crowd with a Pepperoni Special on each arm, while "Pornographic Music" takes the cinematic associations of the solo sax to their logical conclusion by dubbing on the sounds of people... well, you

work it out.

Misterka has a solid, if unconventional technique, but many of these pieces are played with gusto rather than precision, which only adds to the overall sense of bad attitude and cheerful make-do. None of this should be taken to imply that this is an easy record, with tracks like the bristlingly complicated "RAM the Robot" and the industrial noise collage "[12.1.99]". It's pretty harsh in places, but there's a sense of humour running throughout it which leavens what can otherwise turn into a rather lonely and frustrating kind of music.

This isn't really a solo sax record, in the sense that it's a solo record by a saxophonist who also does a lot of other things. It just shows how different these things can be, though, from the traditional solo reed workout. Not that there's anything wrong with those -- Leimgruber's, especially, is an excellent piece of work, and one hopes that we'll hear more from him in the future.

Richard Cochrane

Modisti: Signoise

([CEDI](#): 8)

Belma Martin (voice, wind objects), Pedro Lopez (objects, sampling, tapes)

If, on the basis of the instrumentation, you expect one of those junk-noise collages which so often don't work, you're in for a big surprise. Although on paper Modisti are a duet of live object-sampling and voice, in reality their pieces are carefully constructed. Lopez may play "objects intended for the trash", but he has no interest in the dull banging about which usually emerges from such an approach.

The key to this duet seems to lie in Lopez's use of the sampler. Through this, he is able to take the original sounds, process them and work them together into a cohesive whole. What's really quite astonishing about this disc is that it's a live recording; everything sounds so crafted, with that overall logicity which usually comes from hours in the studio. These pieces have all the coherence of electroacoustic compositions, and although some preparation can be deduced from Lopez's use of tapes and samples, the element of improvisation gives these performances a very attractive spontaneity.

Martin uses the extremes of her voice for the most part; at times, as on track three, her choked, guttural sounds are disturbing rather than particularly musical. For the most part, however, these primeval sounds fuse closely with the electronics. The result is cybernetic, like one of those moments in a Cronenberg movie in which you can't be sure whether you're looking at a primordial animal or a futuristic machine. In that difficult third track, for example, Martin's in extremis gargling is picked up by Lopez and re-analysed, forming the basis of an uneasy but fascinating game of variations.

Lopez, as a promoter of CEDI and editor of the excellent Hurly Burly magazine, here shows himself to also be an extremely capable and interesting musician; Belma Martin's voice sounds like few others, and her courage in pursuing such an unforgiving path has paid off in this duet. Those who enjoy electroacoustic composition will love this disc; these are eight very distinctive, challenging and accomplished improvisations at -- as the title slyly implies -- the border of music and everyday sound.

Richard Cochrane

Natraj: Deccan Dance

(Gallopig Goat: GGCD-3424)

Phil Scarff (saxophones), Mat Maneri (electric violin), Michael Rivard (bass), Jerry Leake (percussion), Bertram Lehmann (percussion)

Kang/van derSchyff/Houle: Pieces of Time

([Spool](#): SPL104)

Eyvind Kang (violin), Francois Houle (clarinet), Dylan van der Schyff (drums)

The African influence on jazz -- indeed, many would argue, the African origins of jazz -- made a deep impression on the originators of free music, but to the European avant garde this attachment looked hokey at best and fetishistic at worst; and since the early seventies, few have looked into it much. Here are two groups who, in radically different ways, seem to have dusted it off for a second look.

Natraj take the more conventional route, offering eight heads-and-solos affairs which cook up both Indian and African methods with fairly straight contemporary jazz. The results have a rather shiny feel which might put some listeners off -- Scarff can sound very much like Andy Sheppard -- but the joys of hearing Maneri in such an un-Maneri setting are worthy of the effort. He's evidently been influenced by Hindustani violin and santoor music, and his well-honed feel for microtones serves him well. Like Elliott Sharp in *The President*, he is a joyously anarchic presence in otherwise rather mainstream surroundings.

Those who aren't scared off by tunes and foot-tapping rhythms will like this record a lot. Scarff isn't the most involving player in the world, but he does a good job, and at his best he's more reminiscent of Wayne Shorter than of Sheppard. On occasion, as on "Na Yella Bo", he can find the thread of an argument and chase it down like a bloodhound, making pretty compelling listening. His style makes a good contrast with Maneri, whose playing is more thematic here than usual, but not that much more.

A word for the two percussionists (Lehmann is at the trap set most of the session), too: they're accomplished enough that the co-opting of such different strategies as West African drumming, Karnatic tabla and jazz kit drumming don't sound too much like ethnic tourism. If purists will complain that Leake's tabla isn't in tune on "Raga Bihag", that rather misses the point: this is an exercise in fusion, not purism, and if the purists are offended then so be it.

Natraj's brand of fusion is pretty cohesive and the results are polished and professional. What Kang's trio does is very different. Its surface is prickly and unwelcoming, dominated by pizzicato scrabbling, galloping percussion figures and the most abstract of Houle's many moods; there's no jazz at all on this session. At first glance, then, it seems to be chamber improv, just old-fashioned chamber improv, that's all, and nothing to pay too much attention to.

All of which makes it surprising to find that the group seem to submerge into these improvisations references to African and Indian melodies. Now, there are few things worse than chamber improv groups which, not having the courage of their convictions, decide to scatter in some more accessible moments to keep the crowd happy. But this isn't that; the African feel goes all the way down, down through the SME-like trio work, down through the 60s avant textures and the bedrock of make-it-new modernism.

It's hard to explain exactly how this works, but the presence of the melodic material seems seamlessly wedded to the surrounding music and to the group's overall MO. Suddenly, Kang's fiddle sounds like an mbira, Houle's clarinet like a wooden flute (in fact, this writer suspects that he's playing a flute of some sort on track two, although he's credited only on clarinet). Kang works with Bill Frisell these days, and Houle has played folk-influenced jazz many times before; this trio has a synergy which goes beyond any nonsense about "telepathic communication": they actually share common musical strategies.

There are probably not too many people who will find these CDs equally to their liking. Both are fine records. Natraj present a not-too-challenging but very enjoyable take on Indo-Afro-Jazz fusion, and their melodic and rhythmic drive is pretty irresistible. What Kang, Houle and van der Schyff are up to is more profound, if less immediately accessible. Spool are a label well worth checking out, and this release is an extremely impressive one.

Richard Cochrane

Andrew Neumann: No Fly Zone

([Sublingual](#): SLR003)

Andrew Neumann (synthesisers, sampler)

Apart from the impossible-to-ignore fact of its being improvised live, these tracks bear a striking resemblance to all manner of people working in what dance music magazines call "experimental music". You can hear Alec Empire in his deliberately awkward, punch-drunk solo lines, Techno Animal in his gritty analogue beats and zoviet*france in his more wacked-out moments.

There's a definite sound associated with Neumann's primitivist "no overdubs" approach. These tracks have none of the finesses, none of the layered pads and little details which come from hours spent worrying at four seconds of stuff in Cubase. They're bare, exposed synth solos, for the most part, with nary so much as a bassline or even more than two things going on at once. So, a track like "Anatomy of a Bone Crushing Incident" is essentially made by running the fingers around on the keyboard while tweaking some effects.

That's going to upset a lot of people who like their electronica rich and highly-crafted, but there's something punky about this whole disc which denies that impulse anyway. Even something like "Nightbird", which manages to get a few things happening simultaneously, does so by virtue of a delay effect which is hardly terribly sophisticated. The result is oddly grungy, a collision of high-tech equipment with lo-tech performance values and techniques, a refusal to create the sweeping orchestral mush so typical of the ambient techno this most resembles.

This approach also engenders something else; in order to avoid becoming boring, Neumann has to be very inventive, trying different approaches for different pieces. He only has a few basic techniques -- play the keyboard, use the delay, tweak the effects -- and so he has to continually come up with things that don't sound like each other. This yields some very nice results; everything from the predictably floaty "Moon Minus Gravity" to the croaking frog improv of "Batched Bird".

One oft-puzzled-over problem with this kind of music is that it's not clear what you're supposed to do with it. It's too surprising to be background music, too abrasive for chill-out listening, not bangin' enough to dance too or tuneful enough to whistle as you walk down the road. What's more, it doesn't have the level of high-definition detail of some musics (particularly those which are usually reviewed in musings), which makes them suitable for just sitting down and listening to.

In the end, this is one of those discs like Mouse on Mars' "Iora Tahiti", The Orb's "Little Album" and Alec Empire's "Les Etoiles des Filles Mortes". When do we play them? What do we do when we put them on? This writer has no idea, but put them on we do. Somehow they're ideal wandering-about-the-flat-doing-this-and-that music, music which doesn't demand your full attention (try wandering around the flat doing this and that to Derek Bailey; doesn't work) but which rewards it when you do tune in. Oh, and excellent for compilation tapes.

Richard Cochrane

Music by Phil Niblock

([Experimental Intermedia Foundation](#): XI111)

Soldier String Quartet, Eberhard Blum (bass flute), Susan Stenger (flute)

Paul Panhuysen: Partitas for Long Strings

([Experimental Intermedia Foundation](#): XI122)

Paul Panhuysen (long strings)

Minimalism lives... or something like minimalism, anyway, although these two discs find it much transformed from the minimalist strategies with which we think we're coolly familiar. Out go the iterative processes (there wasn't really anywhere to go with them) and the hammering arpeggios (they never sounded much good anyway); in come long, slow-moving forms or un-forms or ur-forms. Niblock and Panhuysen, of course, approach their huge blocks of sound in entirely different ways.

Phil Niblock's music is about the grainy detail which emerges from long, rich sounds heard together. He is fascinated, it seems, by difference tones and harmonics, and the two pieces presented on this disc explore the small-scale complexities which emerge when sustained sounds from acoustic, live instruments are combined.

If that sounds like a slight idea, this music will surprise you. The massed layers each involve a single note moving extremely slowly in pitch, and the combined effect changes constantly. As with all the best art made from minimal materials, it amazes with its sheer range. Once the music takes hold of you (it helps to play it very loud), it's irresistible, revealing a world of detail rather like that discovered by the first users of microscopes.

It goes without saying that music like this is terribly hard to play. The Soldier Quartet play with headphones feeding them their notes -- sine waves (or something similar) which shift slowly in pitch as each piece unfolds. They do so with iron resolve and no small amount of daring; it must have been terrifying to approach the end of the forty-five minute "Early Winter" and know that a mistake or even a dodgy quaver in the articulation could well mean that the whole thing had to be done again. In fact, the performances here are impeccable, and the music which results shimmers with its own very peculiar loveliness.

Paul Panhuysen's Partitas are an entirely different kettle of fish, although the first piece here bears some striking similarities in sound. The strings heard here are gallery installations centring on wires stretched across the space, with or without the addition of resonators and automated exciters. Panhuysen is therefore as much a part of the artworld as of avant garde music, and one could easily suspect this disc of being one of those "documentation" projects which never really sound good unless you know the larger work of which the sound is a part.

There's no fear of this here, however, and what these recordings demonstrate is that Panhuysen is at least as much a musician as he is an artist. There are three here, all lengthy (over twenty minutes) examinations of a particular tuning method: unison, equally diminishing and proportional.

The unison piece is the one which resonates with Niblock's quartets. It's even more minimal, however; there's almost no perceptible change in the buzz-saw note the strings produce for the entire duration. As with Niblock, one becomes fascinated by the detail, although here it's more a matter of trying to be sufficiently attentive that any change is audible at all. The experience is one which will be familiar to lovers of so-called "lowercase" music; it won't be to all tastes, but it's an interesting journey.

Things take a radically different turn when the strings are tuned in equally diminishing lengths. The intervals between them are intensely dissonant, and they are played much more actively, with notes audibly coming and going and with harmonics creating clouds of ultra-high pitches above the throbbing beat frequencies of the fundamentals. This will be much more approachable for most listeners, and anyone familiar with Ligeti or Penderecki will hear their ancestral voice in this.

The sheer texture of the sound here is ravishingly fine-grained and, as with much minimal art, one is drawn to an unaccustomed involvement with the detailed aesthetic surface of the material itself. On a more conventional level, however, this is carefully-played and distinctive music which sucks you in and doesn't let you go.

The third piece, which uses a proportional tuning system, is similar to the second, but there is a distinct differentiation -- and how this is achieved is a mystery -- between extreme dissonances and a rather cool set of semi-consonant intervals. Again it shifts about restlessly, but there is a much greater sense here that the music is anchored. Indeed, this feels like the most musically of the three pieces here; that's not to be taken evaluatively, of course.

These are two hugely impressive releases from XI records. Both come with copious sleeve notes and are impeccably recorded. If this kind of thing is anywhere near your radar, snap them up.

Noble/Williams/Marshall: Flathead Reunion

(Ping Pong Productions: PPCD001)

Steve Noble (drums, turntables), Davey Williams (guitar), Oren Marshall (electric tuba)

These three have been chucking some of this material around for a couple of years now, and they've managed to keep an edge on it. Superficially a fusion of out-rock and free improv, their music transcends such categorising by including Marshall's no-wavey electro-tuba and Noble's turntables. These latter conjure the familiar spirits -- illbient, abstraction, collage and, inevitably, faint shades of Hip Hop -- and go a step further, too. At times, the trio indulge in frenzied, Last Exit-styled wig-outs over Noble's rock school chops, at others they drift on weird cyber-ambiences, the bastard children of the birdsong and running water of New Age meditation tapes.

On more than one occasion here, Williams fluffs runs which an above-average player should expect to coast through. His conception, however, is not entirely based around the standard single-note approach, and he sounds best when he stays out of that particular arena. Blending with Noble's turntables is Williams' most comfortable role, the two producing a nicely organic texture on the less gung-ho tracks.

When he plays more soloistically, problems of tone and phrasing emerge which a more conventionally accomplished player would have overcome. These are problems, not distortions undertaken with musical intent, and although they arise from an admirable risk-taking attitude which works well in a live context, they rather stand out on record. Poor technique mars performances like "Hog Stomp" and the title track, and particularly obstructs some nice ideas in "All Too Soon". The disdain in which traditional standards of technical ability are held in certain quarters of the improv community (all that sniffing about "legitimate technique") could do with dusting off and re-examining. These more eclectic times than the 1970s when that particular idea was thought up.

"All Too Soon" features a literally screaming solo from Oren Marshall, whose amplified and heavily processed tuba defines the record's sound without ever dominating it. To say that he is one of the best British free-improvising tuba players might sound like trying to pick the best Mormon punk band, but the instrument has had something of a revival, both in the big-band projects of the 1980s and in smaller groupings where its agility can almost match the string bass and its presence is evocative of pre-swing jazz. Braxton's compositions for the instrument, including Five Tubas, explicitly make this connection. Marshall stays off the cod-New Orleans sounds here, of course, often playing the effects more than the tuba to produce a form of live electronics.

The trio create some involving soundscapes, often ambient in intention, even if their sense of fun too easily coaxes Noble (a fine drummer, and stalwart of the scene) into a gratuitous groove. Some tracks here -- often the short ones, some of which come in at under a minute -- are intriguing. This album is refreshing, too, if only for its absence of po-faced vanguardism. And if Williams sometimes cannot meet his ideas half way, Marshall's abstractions and Noble's unique turntables more than makes up for it. Recommended (cautiously), but a poor second to seeing them live.

Kevin Norton: For Guy Debord (in Nine Events)

(Barking Hoop: BKH001)

Anthony Braxton (reeds), Bob DeBellis (reeds), David Bindman (reeds), Tomas Ulrich (cello), Joe Fonda (bass), Kevin Norton (drums)

Kevin Norton: Knots

([Music and Arts](#): CD1033)

Bob DeBellis (reeds), David Bindman (reeds), David Krakauer (clarinet), Tomas Ulrich (cello), Joe Fonda (bass), Kevin Norton (drums)

Norton is a percussionist linked with the increasingly fertile Tri-Centric organisation headed up, of course, by the great Anthony Braxton, who appears on the first of these discs. He's an accomplished player, but perhaps even more important are his compositional skills, which he shows off to the full here, and especially on the disc with Braxton.

"For Guy Debord (in Nine Events)" is a typically grandiose title for a jazz suite, if that's what it is. It's certainly what it sounds like, and its construction -- basically a set of ensemble passages and a mixture of scoring and improvisation -- only reinforces the impression. The music takes on various shades through its thirty-five minutes, but it's not pointlessly orchestral; indeed, Norton appears to have chosen a fairly conventional grouping so as to concentrate on the notes rather than the colouration.

The results are impressive indeed, and the music has no trouble at all holding the attention. Braxton isn't particularly featured; it's an ensemble record within which solos occasionally crop up, and it has to be said that one at least of the other reed players is so much in the older man's shadow that it's hard to be sure who's playing what. This is fine, because it's not a record about personalities. The personality which comes across most stringly is the composer's and, a close second, Norton's vibes, which make the opening reminiscent of (no faint praise, this) "Out To Lunch".

Having mentioned the length of the piece, it's worth pointing out that there's no extra padding to make this CD twice as long as it needs to be. This is a good thing; there are far too many over-long albums out there, and "For Guy Debord" stands perfectly well on its own merits. One tiny grumble: it would have been easy enough to index the nine "events", which might have made the disc slightly more accessible, but never mind.

The band is tight and hugely inventive, so it's good to see they didn't just form for this piece; "Knots" finds them (sans Brax, of course) tearing up eleven charts by Norton and two old Monk favourites in extremely pleasing fashion. Norton's compositions are sometimes perverse, deliberately surprising things which everyone clearly enjoys playing. Heads can be lengthy and multi-segmented, re-emerging at odd moments, as is the way with contemporary (and particularly post-Braxton) jazz composition.

It has to be said that there's nothing astonishingly new here, but what there is is an extraordinary quintet playing unusual and often beautiful music. Ulrich is, as usual, a huge asset, and the front line are a powerful and precise set of lungs. The excellent Krakauer plays on just three tracks, but with fire in his belly; one wishes for more after he's gone, but the quality of what follows doesn't disappoint.

Richard Cochrane

Not Missing Drums Project: Urban Voices

([Leo Lab](#): CD036)

Lauren Newton (vocals), Joelle Leandre (bass, vocals), Uschi Bruning (vocals), Joachim Gies (saxophone, bass clarinet), Thomas Wiedermann (trombone, shakuhachi), Jurgen Kupke (clarinet), Elisabeth Bohm-Christl (bassoon, double bassoon), Ulli Bartel (violin), Gerhard Ubele (violin), Thomas Bohn-Christl (cello), Hartwig Nickola (bass), Dieter Zeretzke (piano)

Large-group music without a drum kit is hardly much of a novelty, and if that were all NMDP were offering then this would be a slight thing indeed. Fortunately, there is a lot more to it than that; the group aims to fuse classical and jazz ideas in a music world which transcends both. Perhaps they do miss the drums occasionally -- preparations are used in the piano for percussive effect at one point, while at another the group strike the bodies of their instruments to create a disjointed riff. The absence of a trap set, however, does give them a more chamber-oriented sound, and it reduces the temptation to divide the group into rhythm section, horn section and soloist

From the first note, you can feel the quality. Although track one -- beguilingly entitled "From the Jerking of the Eels" -- is atypical, it's lots of fun, a jazzy knockabout with freewheeling, post-Taylor piano. From here on in, however, the music takes a more serious turn, and the track titles become things like "Equivalents", "Vibration" and "Constellations for Bases". Here the classical influence comes to the fore, and the atonal but post-serialist composition of the 1970s and '80s springs to mind. Some tracks even feature the singers' relatively legitimate sounds in oratorio-derived settings, reminding this writer of Alexander Goehr.

Gies, Wiedermann and Thomas Bohn-Christl get composer credits, and there is a fair bit of composition on this record, but their individual voices are difficult to pin down. Gies and Bohn-Christl do either contrapuntal, atonal pieces or rather more funky workouts. Wiedermann contributes two oddly understated pieces, more like group improvisations than compositions in the accepted sense, and this is symptomatic of the album as a whole. There are certainly sections which must have been, and sections which could not have been, composed, but the majority is music which is less easy to pin down; music which must result from either near-telepathic improvisation or unusually organic writing.

The real stars are the vocalists, all three masters of unhinged jabber and wail, all three remarkably varied in vocabulary yet mostly identifiable. In the ensemble sections, they blend with the horns and strings rather than singing words, but it is their solo improvisations which really stand out, hair-raising and hilarious by turns and consistently involving. They improvise their words, one suspects, but stick mostly to a deranged scat, although Newton at one point launches into "Roll Me Over In The Clover" followed by a deluge of obscene-sounding German.

The other instrumentalists get the reduced solo space that comes with the territory, but fill it interestingly. Special mention should be made for Elisabeth Bohm-Christl, playing a reed which even Braxton balks at and breaking a little ground while doing so. The whole recording is an excellent piece of work, and probably one of the most enjoyable and original albums of the year.

Richard Cochrane

Not Missing Drums Project: Offline Adventures

([Leo Lab](#) : CD057)

Margarete Huber (voice), Magreth Kammerer (voice), Alex Nowitz (voice), Wolfgang Rittthof (voice), Ernst-Ludwig Petrowsky (reeds), Joachim Gies (reeds), Jurgen Kupke (clarinet), Rudi Mahall (bass clarinet), Elisabeth Bohm-Christl (bassoon, double bassoon), Axel Dorner (trumpet), Thomas Wiedermann (trombone), Aleks Kolkowski (violin), Wolfram Korr (violin), Thomas Bohm-Christl (cello), Gesine Conrad (cello), Matthias Bauer (bass, voice), Gerold Genssler (bass), Hartwig Nickola (bass), Bardo Hennig (piano), Andrea Neumann (piano)

The [previous release by this group](#) (1998, also on Leo Lab) featured a somewhat smaller lineup but the same musicians on every track. This disc, emphasising the fluid membership of NMDP, combines the personnel listed above in anything from a duet to several nonets. As before, the group mixes up contemporary classical sounds with jazz, and here the latter element is very much to the fore. The unusual instrumentation means this is slightly odd-sounding jazz, rather like the music Stravinsky composed under that name, but jazz it most certainly is.

The voices are less dominant in these sessions than on the earlier disc. There, the main solo statements were vocal; here, the voices are more integrated into the ensembles and there is more room for fine players like Dorner to stretch out. On the Monkish "Open Promises", for example, the trumpeter takes a wonderfully didactic solo, moving from Miles through Freddie Hubbard and into the avant garde. Anyone who has heard him playing free improvisation will know that Dorner has a highly-developed noise-based technique. Here, as in his work on Monk's tunes with Schlippenbach (they once played the entire Monk oeuvre in one night) he reveals a strong understanding of bebop fused to the angular, loping dissonances which the pianist enjoyed so much.

If this is one extreme of this album, "Formations for the Fragile" is perhaps the opposite. Through-composed and closely reminiscent of the less ascerbic forms of New Music, this is all spikey strings, Bohm-Christl's warm bassoon sound and Nowitz sounding uncharacteristically like a classical baritone. It's a well-concieved composition and the group play it with commitment and energy; while one can't help feeling one has heard this kind of thing many times before, but that's true of "Open Promises", too, and it shouldn't devalue either piece.

More to the point, these two pieces represent extremes of a spectrum which this disc explores in detail. Far from being a fragmentary mix-up of Miles Davis and Maxwell-Davies, this is an exploration of the possible points of contact between the two. While we do get the expected "chamber improv" in tracks like "Liquid Movements", we also get a majority of tracks which really do sound like an update of the "Ebony Concerto"; classical jazz, yes, but full of energy and imagination. Far from the stale, Marsalian world of academic bop, this is, perhaps paradoxically, a living, breathing engagement with a broad sweep of twentieth-century European musics.

Richard Cochrane

One King Poets: Major Wood

(Fragile Noise: CD99FN50)

Mike Walter (saxophones), Paul Shearsmith (trumpet, trombone), Giles Perring (electric guitar), Jerry Bird (bass), Robin Musgrove (drums)

It would be tempting to say, in that journalistic cliché, that the One King Poets are a controlled musical explosion. Mining an unfashionable vein of groove-based, electrified improvisation, they invite comparison with 70s Miles, Mahavishnu and, at times, Last Exit. But such comparisons can be lazy and, as Richard Sanderson points out in his sleeve notes, they're also unhelpful to all concerned, as journalistic clichés often are. Anyway, the OKP aren't polite enough to control themselves -- they just explode.

This group, like the wonderful [FJQ](#), is built on the granite foundation of Musgrove and Bird. The former favours 6/8 and 4/4 rhythms and swings so hard it's prudent to open the windows. Bird locks in with him using an unconventional two-handed tapping technique on the fretless bass; the result is a swaggering, quasi-tonal funk.

As a duo, these two can make very involving music, but the OKP's initial lineup also included saxophonist Mike Walter. His gutsy, bad-boy tenor work makes him no Wayne Shorter, and he's more than capable of pushing the button marked "noise" when he wants to. This is hardly a rhythm-and-reeds arrangement either, however. There are solos here, but the dynamic is closer to Ornette's Free Jazz session, in which the whole group plays together, commenting on and helping to develop the solo line. Typically, there are several solos going on at once.

This brings us to the other two members, Perring and Shearsmith. Perring plays in the Hendrixian tradition, with plenty of imagination in his bluesy wha-wha and a good sense of ensemble work. Shearsmith uses a completely different approach. He likes to sit out and make minimal but extremely effective contributions, as if shouting them from the sidelines. Because of this, he's easy to underestimate, but his work here is decisive. If you get the chance, see these boys live; whether you do or not, this recording captures them in full flight. Recommended.

Richard Cochrane

Henry Kuntz: One One & One

(Hummingbird CD2/3)

Henry Kuntz (reeds), Don Marvel (electronics)

Opeye: Moss 'Comes Silk

(Hummingbird: CD1)

Henry Kuntz, Ben Lindgren, Brian Godchaux, Esten Lindgren, John Kuntz (all various instruments)

James Fei: For Saxophone with Card Reed and Gated Amplification/Camptown Races 1

(Organised Sound Recordings: no number)

James Fei (reeds)

New CD label Hummingbird offers opportunities for non-Californians to discover the unique Henry Kuntz; on the other coast, fellow saxophonist Fei releases a tantalising mini-CD, also on his own label. Listening to musicians' releases on their own labels is often a wonderful way to encounter them, providing direct access to the performer's conception with no intermediation.

Avant-Shamanic Trace Jazz is vaguely reminiscent of the experiments by Archie Shepp and others involving playing along with raucous reed groups like the Master Musicians of Joujouka. The difference is that Opeye find themselves very much in a postmodern frame. Thus, the quest for ethnic and cultural "authenticity" (a snark if ever there was one) is replaced by, well, rampant fusion, appropriation, even fakery.

This is no bad thing, of course, and Opeye make a joyous riot of a record. "Fancy Dancing Jaguar" is a case in point, with the Chinese Musette playing something sounding like a Middle-Eastern Coltrane while the group free-improvises; John Kuntz does wild, scrawling violence to a steel guitar, Esten Lindgren's trombone occasionally making the sound *um-pah*, a moment later laying down a mournful ballad solo. Everything into the melting pot at once: that seems to be the recipe here. Often the results of such a thing are ugly, but here they're a pleasure to listen to. One of those records where you wish you were in the band when they made it.

One One & One is quite a contrast, a double CD featuring Kuntz solo on tenor sax on the first disk, then in duet with Don Marvel on the second. Unfortunately, the latter's grasp of improvising electronics extends little further than sampling and looping the things Kuntz plays. The results aren't terrible, just a little dull. If you wish improvising musicians played everything five times, this is for you.

The solo disk, however, is well worth the admission price on its own. Kuntz reveals himself as a powerful presence on the sax, and how disciplined of him to stick to tenor, in these days of everybody playing ten different horns. Instead of falling back on changes of instrumentation for variety, he has to make music.

This he does with a sound which combines impressively-controlled ultra-high-register squeaks and whistles with the tenor's more conventional voice. One is strongly reminded of Evan Parker's way of playing with John Stevens -- it's logical, timbrally adventurous, often percussive and always full of ideas. Not that Kuntz sounds like Parker, as his voice is too jazzy and American for that. Fantastic stuff.

New Yorker James Fei is another reedsman who likes to play solo, but there the similarities come to an end. Although not academically trained in music, he's attracted to the classical avant garde, and although an improviser his pieces often involve a conceptual compositional element. This self-released CD-R, if it's still available to buy (numbered copies...) offers twelve minutes of truly intriguing music from a relentless experimenter. The main piece inserts a cardboard reed into the sax and amplifies it, resulting in a ten-minute evolution from tiny, semi-random clicks into a wall of feedback. Truly inventive stuff, much closer to electroacoustic composition than to jazz or improv. Let's hope Fei records more often.

Richard Cochrane

Osso Exotico: Church Organ Works

(Sonoris: SON-03 [Tel: +351 1 3530353, Portugal])

Patrician Machas, David Maranha, Andre Maranha (organ), Bernardo Devlin (voice, one track only)

Osso Exocita appear to be a loose affiliation or collective of experimental music-makers, although the David and Andre Maranhas appear on all of their releases to date and Devlin and Machas on most of them. They've been recording since 1990, demonstrating at the very least the willingness of their members to play a variety of instruments. Here, they're let loose on two church organs, and they turn in pleasingly distinctive and interesting performances.

The overall feel is fairly minimal, though this is hardly minimalist, and the fact that most of the tracks are refreshingly short-ish gives these improvisations and compositions (the balance is unclear) the quality of little studies, exercises which take small ideas and work them through with care and attention. Sometimes they make much use of repetition -- of which David Maraha seems particularly fond -- but at others they seem to simply allow the music to drift, in a measured and rather stately way, from one end of the church to the other.

Each half of the disc -- one from Lisbon, one from Marvila -- contains at least one solo by each participant (except Devlin) plus one duet, with the disc climaxing with a six-handed piece which spends nearly quarter of an hour exploring slowly unfolding, often dissonant harmonies. This deliberate slowness is a big part of what this disc seems to be about, and it makes it a nicely ambient disc which, like all the best of that sort, repays closer listening as well.

On the strength of this release, the Osso Exotico ethos seems to place a high value on simplicity. These are rarely barnstorming performances, being rather egoless and being likeable for all that. The music is uncomplicated, unprepossessing and largely rather quiet, sometimes utilising ambient sounds which are just as prominent as the organ itself. They're not a well-known group (one release on Staalplaat seems their best shot at fame and fortune) but perhaps they deserve a little more recognition.

Richard Cochrane

Pago Libre

(L & R: CDLR45105)

Tscho Theissing (violin), Arkady Shilkloper (french horn), John Wolf Brennan (piano), Daniele Patumi (bass)

Shooting Stars and Traffic Lights

(L & R: CDLR45090)

Tscho Theissing (violin), John Voirol (saxophones, synthophone), John Wolf Brennan (piano), Daniele Patumi (bass), Alex Cline (drums)

These two discs document Brennan's ongoing fascination with the jazz tradition. More than that, they gather up some of the strategies that he, Patumi and Theissing use in their attempts to breathe new life into the head-solos-head format, the metrical structures and cyclic changes which free jazz abandoned nearly forty years ago.

All this is rather reminiscent of Steve Lacy, who's had some nice things to say about Brennan's groups in the past. Not surprising, really, since they share a whistful but often abrasive approach, a tendency to switch from carress to rabbit punch without the slightest warning. In light of the fact that Brennan's reputation is built on his composition, however, it's good to see how much space he gives to Patumi and Theissing on these two sessions.

The former is a flashy, funky bass player with a tendency towards slap-style playing despite his using an upright instrument. His popping riffs underpin deceptively slippery melody lines, however, and his inventiveness gives his rhythm section work a fiery effectiveness. Theissing, on the other hand, is half Grapelli, half kletzmer foot-stomper, injecting excitement into the written parts and diving headlong into his solos. These two navigate the tricky time signatures with an offhand swing born of familiarity with both the material and their fellow musicians.

Pago Libre are a regular group, a quartet who play ensemble-based jazz with a heavy compositional element and a close mutual understanding. Still, it's hard not to single out Shlikloper's contribution for special mention. He's a genuinely great jazz player, working the whole seam from bebop to freeform, on the French horn, of all things. Probably the finest jazz player on the instrument of all time, for his contribution alone this disc is worth the asking price. His compositions are surprisingly complex affairs given his tendency to focus on linear development in his solos; "Interludi" is an odd-metre-infused broth which just keeps on twisting and turning, sprouting unexpected melodic ideas right up to the end. "Waltz in 4/4", on the other hand, must be the only piece to make playing in the most common metre of all seem tricky, a strangely beguiling piece which has you constantly checking it still really is in four.

Shlikloper's absence in Shooting Stars and Traffic Lights, then, might seem a difficult one to make up for. That's if one forgets the sheer quality of Theissing and Patumi; if one forgets how good Brennan's piano sounds in these settings, and if one ignores the presence of Cline and Voirol, whose presence, in fairness, can't be ignored for long.

Voirol is a lilting player, not much given to fireworks, but then, unlike Shlikloper, he doesn't have to prove the viability of his instrument every time he picks it up. As a result, he keeps things pretty cool and collected, even on a barnstormer like "Toccata", in which he does make a more aggressive intervention but still steers well clear of quick-fire runs or bluesy screaming. Where these techniques are employed -- as on "Gathering at the Threshold" -- he shows he can handle himself, but that seems to be a side of his playing that, at least in this group, he prefers to avoid. Like Brennan, Cline is a highly flexible player. Both are able to play anywhere on the continuum from very straight to completely free; and like Brennan, Cline always manages to sound like himself. His swinging ride cymbal or textural effects never sound like hack-work, but his contribution does make this a more conventionally jazzy ensemble than Pago Libre.

As for Brennan himself, there are other places to hear his piano-playing undiluted, but it's good to hear him working with groups in this way. Although not in the least domineering, he underpins both sessions with the sensitivity and surety of touch which he brings to all of his projects. Whether comping changes or embellishing a solo with pretty arpeggios or skull-rattling clusters, his is a strong hand on the tiller which steers both ensembles through some difficult waters. These are both enormously agreeable discs of challenging jazz compositions performed by top-notch musicians.

Richard Cochrane

Pago Libre: Wake Up Call

([Leo](#): CDLR272)

Tscho Theissing (violin, voice), Arkady Shilkloper (french horn, flugelhorn), John Wolf Brennan (piano, melodica), Daniele Patumi (bass)

Brennan/Coleman/Wolfarth: Momentum

([Leo](#): CDLR274)

John Wolf Brennan (piano, prepared piano), Gene COleman (bass clarinet, melodica), Christian Wolfarth (percussion)

Two releases on Leo; one an opportunity to hear an established group in a live setting, the other a new grouping and a step into what seems to be a new compositional direction for Brennan.

Pago Libre are, like many groups, even hotter in concert than they are in the studio. The sense of headlong rush, driven by nervous excitement, with which the disc opens does cool off from time to time, but it rarely vanishes; this group's intelligent, highly committed vision of jazz, complete with heads, changes and solos, is quite unlike anyone else's.

Some of these compositions are ones which have been recorded before -- "Wake up Call" and "Toccatacca", and the cerebral, seemingly through-composed ballad "Tupi-Kulai". It's interesting to hear them re-interpreted. "Wake up Call" and "Tupti Kulai" retain the arrangements which Pago Libre committed to disc on [CDLR45105](#), a joint release by Leo Records and Ballaphon from 1996. Meanwhile, "Toccatacca" and "Kabak", recorded by the quintet Shooting Stars and Traffic Lights on their [eponymous 1995 album](#), get fresh new arrangements to account for the slightly different instrumentation of Pago Libre.

Those interested in the individual musicians will find more information in the [reviews](#) of these two previous disks; Theissing, Shilkloper and Patumi are extraordinary musicians ideally suited to Brennan's fusion of bebop, free jazz, improv and world folk. Take Theissing's introduction to "Kabak"; a four-minute fiery furnace of Indo-Jewish impro-jazz which builds towards the foot-stomping theme and has the audience begging for more.

As for the compositions which haven't been committed to mica before, they have much in common with the pieces with which they share the bill. Patumi's "African Blossom" is clearly a variation on his previous "African Flower", although more diffuse, a sophisticated and delicate duet with Theissing's violin. Shilkloper's "Folk Song" is a solo cadenza of almost discursive clarity, while "Kobra" is another convoluted thread which the musicians play as if it were "Body and Soul"; it isn't, and it constantly twists and turns in unexpected directions. "Synopsis", meanwhile, is a more sedate variation on the "Wake up Call" model, with its sweet harmonies and punchy rhythms, this time with a rather sectional arrangement of solos.

Pago Libre live are evidently well worth catching, a well-drilled team which has existed for over a decade, playing a music which is simultaneously nostalgic and futuristic. In contrast, the trio of Brennan, Gene Coleman and Christian Wolfarth is new, spikey and exploratory project. While Pago Libre has the benefit of time to create something honed, this trio has the alternate virtue of not seeming to know quite what will happen next.

The disk documents what is referred to as "comprovisations in a vertical circle". Attempting to disentangle John Corbetts pretentiously obfuscating liner notes (bad news: he seems to have rediscovered Deleuze and Guattari from his grad-school days, folks; the logorrhea may never cease), it seems that there is some compositional element here, influenced by Stockhausen's conception of "moment form". The truth is that Wolfarth and Coleman are both free improvisors, with little background (as far as this writer is aware) in score interpretation, and the truth is that this sounds like a free improv album even if it's not.

The format is four duets and six trios. Of the duets, Brennan appears on two and his colleagues on three each (you work it out). Wolfarth is a percussionist in the Han Bennink school, pushing home the uneven pulses of this shifting music with still a vestige of jazz swing under his fingernails. There are moments when he seems only interested in texture, but they don't last long. Wolfarth's desire to ride the waves is too strong. He even, on "To hoo wa bo hoo", briefly strikes up a Blakey-style paradiddle which one half-expects to turn into "Blues March".

That puts him in a strong tradition of free players, although this writer finds that attachment to jazz can sometimes be a problem. However, this trio seems interested specifically in forming a connection between free jazz as played by, say, the Jimmy Giuffre trio, and the more ascetic forms of chamber improv which are now fairly common. There is a chilliness here which is very appealing, although it takes some getting used to. One could refer to it as "cold school"; it takes some of the supposedly glacial austerity of Northern European composers like Magnus Lindberg and applies it to the premise of chamber jazz.

That makes for an extremely interesting record, and a very varied one, as the three try out different strategies for making this music which is quite unlike anything else, what with the unorthodox instrumentation, the unique

approaches of the players and the overall feel of the project being resolutely non-partisan.

Richard Cochrane

Evan Parker: Waterloo, 1985

([Emanem](#) : 4030)

Evan Parker (saxophones), Paul Rutherford (trombone), Hans Schneider (bass), Paul Lytton (percussion, electronics)

A single, hour-long improvisation from players who will be familiar to many readers, in a setting which is similar in sound to Parker's celebrated trio with Paul Lytton and Barry Guy. Rutherford's presence adds an extra element of rough-and-tumble into the mix, and the group's occasional references to more recognisable forms of jazz are swept up in a tightly ensemble-based sound.

What is it, exactly, that Parker's groups play when they play this kind of stuff? It's free jazz, in a sense, but not the same sense that Charles Gayle plays free jazz. The rhythm drifts rather than swings (even when it drifts hard, if such a thing is possible) and the bluesy feel of much free music is replaced with a convoluted linearity more reminiscent of early Coltrane than the later incarnation. The fact that Parker and Rutherford have been playing together a long time shows in their interweaving of melodic lines and their ability to let different combinations of players come to the fore at different moments.

Parker and Rutherford spend much of their time presenting extended soloistic statements accompanied by the others, alongside the full-blown quartet music. Parker, in particular, lets fly a ferocious bout of circular breathing late on in the piece, strongly recalling his solo performances, with which the others interact in a way this writer has not heard on disc before. Rutherford's status as one of the two or three most important improvising trombonists in the world will be only bolstered by this disc, too; he gets plenty of space, and he uses it to stunning effect.

The close relationship both horn players have with Lytton is evident in the trust they place in him. He moves the pulse extremely slowly, marking it out with his ride cymbal but allowing it to float in time between the very spaced-out beats. At the same time, his drums are often attacked with extremely frantic movement. A musician unaccustomed to his playing might find this duality, this tendency to contain frenetic action within a slow-moving and flexible envelope, off-putting at first. Yet Parker and Rutherford know exactly what he's doing: he's working at the quick-moving details in the music while keeping a watchful drumstick on the larger picture. This prevents the group from scrabbling about just as it gives them plenty to play with in the moment, and the result is masterful music.

Schneider is less well-known in the UK, of course, and his contribution here is a little muted. Occasionally he lets rip and gets himself heard, as he does in duet with Lytton's electronics about halfway through the set, creating a complex, layered sound including pizzicati, arco notes and percussion. Mostly, though, he adds occasional touches to the group sound, and it would be good to hear him in a more intimate setting where his voice can be heard more clearly.

Virtually anything involving Parker tends to be essential, but because he releases so frequently it's impossible for any but the most fanatical collectors to keep up. This is a set which has plenty to recommend it. Although a single, hour-long take doesn't tempt you to dip in, it does show these players working out their ideas over an extended period, which is always revealing and which is unusual for Parker, on disc if not on stage. It's the sound of four musicians playing hard but not over-cooking the music, serving up some serious brain-food in the process.

Richard Cochrane

Evan Parker: Foxes Fox

([Emanem](#): 4035)

Evan Parker (saxophones), Steve Beresford (piano), John Edwards (bass), Louis Moholo (percussion)

Leimgruber/Crispell/Leandre/Hauser: Quartet Noir

([Les Disques Victo](#): cd067)

Urs Leimgruber (saxophones), Marilyn Crispell (piano), Joelle Leandre (bass), Fritz Hauser (drums)

There are a few classic combinations which, however hard free improvisors try to distance themselves from the jazz idiom, just won't be kept down. This is one of them, the reeds-and-rhythm format which was a staple of bebop from its earliest inception and which formed the basis of Lennie Tristano's experiments with free music nearly half a century ago. A lot's changed since then but, it seems, not the appeal of the quartet, even for players like these who are often seen in far more unusual groupings.

Parker's quartet is no telephone band; these guys have all been playing together for some time, although it's the first time (to this writer's knowledge) that they've preserved their music on CD. Moholo and Parker are, of course, acknowledged masters; Beresford is an under-sung but long-standing member of the improvised music community, while Edwards is the young whizz-kid who has, in the past few years, impressed and challenged playing partners old enough to be his parents.

This release is nice in that it contains four quartet pieces totalling nearly an hour and also (in typically generous Emanem style) four duets and a trio which were recorded on the same day. Those pieces, only one of which includes Parker, provide a useful way into the styles of the individual musicians for those who are unfamiliar with some or all of them.

The saxophonist's will surely be the best-known of the voices here anyway. He has several tones he can adopt in different settings, but only one which really suits this restless, jazzy setting; his twitchy, sometimes sinuously linear style which largely dispenses with extended techniques (with one exception: his trademarked way of making a staccato note burst off the reed like a bubble in a hot mud pool). One can listen to him doing this all day and never get tired of it; he's a constant fountain of invention, an atonal Sonny Rollins unremittingly chasing down fresh ideas and refusing to repeat himself without good reason. Those who think that Parker's music is samey just aren't listening, and here, in such good company, he is able to fill his lungs with music and blow it out at the kind of pace he enjoys, fast but not furious, mercurial rather than bludgeoning.

"Fox's Fox", the duet of Parker and Moholo, reminded this writer, perhaps in a trivial way or perhaps not, of the great duets Max Roach enjoyed so palpably with free jazz saxophonists. Moholo's playing is hard to describe to someone who hasn't heard it. It seems as if all the beats have broken apart and are suspended in zero gravity, turning this way and that, occasionally colliding and exploding, often drifting about with a disconcerting combination of aimlessness and intense concentration. His chops are so developed that it's often hard to tell what he's doing to create the sounds coming out of the speakers, and within this weirdly dissociated world of splattering, tapping, swooshing sounds shifting without any long-term pulse or apparent logic, an enigmatic genius begins to emerge. For Moholo hits every accent and builds up every phrase with a precision which knocks your socks off.

Beresford is one of those pianists who is referred to most lazily as "like Cecil Taylor". This is because he plays with clusters, apparently random, quick-fire chromatic runs and a focus on rhythm rather than melody or harmony. In this context, however, he is nothing "like Cecil Taylor". Where the latter is a headstrong leader who blasts his way through and expects everyone else to keep up, Beresford here plays a clever supporting role, taking the odd solo but otherwise forming part of the rhythmic tidal wave which keeps the reedsman afloat. In that respect, this is a quite traditional session, Beresford very much part of the rhythm section and Parker taking the lead for the majority of the quartet's music.

Regular readers of (musings) will know that this writer concurs with the many eminent musicians who have called John Edwards because they believe him to be one of the finest bass players in London. His boundless imagination and uncommonly broad repertoire of styles may at times feel bitty, but the snapping ping of his pizzicato already feels like the genesis of an individual voice and, young as he is, he's achieved an enormous amount. His duet with Moholo has an assured unhurriedness which is extremely appealing.

Something of a treat, then, the Parker quartet; a serious but fun, jazzy jam by musicians who know one another and, it seems, enjoy the company. The Quartet Noir disc could hardly be more different, although it's also of extremely high quality. As the name suggests, there is a sombre edge to this music which Parker's quartet never touches on and, in breaking the session down into "movements" rather than punning or whimsical titles, a

debt to classical music is revealed which Parker has rarely shown much interest in.

This music is often spacious, with a limpid rhythm which recalls that terrible phrase "chamber jazz". Again, there are two well-known voices here and two who are less so, but in this case it's the exact opposite of Parker's; Crispell and Leandre and the stars, Leimgruber and Hauser, at least internationally, the lesser-knowns. All of which being said, this quartet has an almost magical compulsiveness about it. Put it in your CD player and it will charm you into leaving it there, not by being pretty (although it is pretty, in a spikey way) but by being so compellingly devised that you can hardly tear away your ears.

If Steve Beresford is "nothing like Cecil Taylor", Marilyn Crispell is really *nothing* like Cecil Taylor. She has always had a genius -- there it is, "genius" twice in the same article -- for creating harmonies which work, for whatever inscrutable reason, in an atonal setting. Occasionally the music becomes more frenetic and the 88-tuned-drums approach gets an airing, but this isn't Crispell at her most characteristic. That voice works better in settings where the heat is turned down off the boil just slightly, as it is for much of this disc. Then she can place those inexplicable chords with an air of great precision; one imagines her fingers moving like those of an expert sculpting clay, pushing and twisting with perfect deliberateness, with her eyes on the intended result rather than the elegantly simple process. If you haven't made time for Crispell yet, it's time you did, and here would be a good place to do it.

It seems almost tedious to say, again, that Leandre is a great bass player. Not like Edwards is a great player -- that is, a young player who is extremely good -- but an established voice with a place in the history of improvised music surely assured by now. Her duet with the saxophonist, which opens "Part II", is all the evidence you need; a minute of pure invention which, like the activities of the agents in *The Matrix*, seems possible only if she were able to slow down time, or else think at the speed of light. Here, as so often, it's her arco playing which impresses; a huge, powerful sound which has within it endless flexibility.

Of the lesser-knowns, Hauser is great at this kind of thing but not, really, a player with much identity. Maybe in other contexts, or in a few years' time, he will be; he has impeccable swing and a great sense of the elastic pulse of this kind of music. In other words, he powers the music along admirably, but compared with Moholo -- an unfair comparison for anyone -- he's less proactive, less individual. In such company, that hardly matters, since there's always plenty to listen to and Hauser never, ever gets it wrong. Maybe it's his own good taste which stops him pushing himself forward; whatever it is, the way he plays makes the session go like gangbusters.

Leimgruber, on the other hand, certainly has his own voice. There are superficial similarities with Parker, actually, especially in the way he plays rivers of notes, each of which seems to be chasing the tail of the previous one. His tone, however, is far more ascerbic than Parker's, with a biting squeal underlying it which can, at the group's most ferocious, feel a little like sucking a lemon. For much of the time, however, he plays a more ensemble role, which works admirably. Although that tone, especially on soprano, can sound rather weak (and off-pitch, as the soprano often is), Leimgruber's ideas more than make up for it. At times, too, that thinness of tone can work in his favour, as when he does a snake-charming routine a few minutes into "Part VI", making a neat reference to Middle Eastern music without hamming it up.

So this is nothing like the Parker quartet's album at all, really, despite identical instrumentation and the same free improv MO. Leandre and Crispell are very fine players indeed, and their partners here make up a very dynamic, very exciting quartet which sounds completely unlike Parker's equally exciting, and almost as dynamic recording. Quartet Noir do play at a higher energy level, and they feel led from the piano more than from the saxophone, but it's the individual musicians who really differentiate the two discs. A recommendation? Buy them both. They can't possibly disappoint.

Richard Cochrane

Evan Parker: The Ayes Have It

([Emanem](#): 4055)

Evan Parker (saxophones), Paul Rogers (bass), Jamie Muir (percussion), Wolter Wierbos (trombone), Mark Sanders (percussion)

Evan Parker and Patrick Scheyder

([Leo](#): CDLR326)

Evan Parker (saxophones), Patrick Scheyder (piano)

Parker's releases might be conveniently if imperfectly divided into two camps: those documenting regular projects involving musicians who are in the mainstream of free improvisation, and those which record one-off meetings with remarkable musicians whose usual activities are not quite like Parker's. Emanem has mainly been concerned with documenting the former, Leo the latter. Both have their virtues; both have crucially important places within Parker's voluminous discography.

The Emanem release in fact captures two sessions separated by almost a decade; Parker and bassist Paul Rogers appear on both. The first was recorded in 1983, and finds Parker and Rogers in the company of one Jamie Muir for four mid-length pieces.

Muir's "kit" seems to consist mainly of bells, chimes and cymbals, and his approach to them is gestural and dynamic. Although he clearly has at least some drum rudiments, his whole attitude to the instrument is very distant from that of improvisors who trained heavily in jazz. He seems to put sounds just where he wants them; an extraordinary player who recorded very sparsely and has long ago absented himself entirely from the scene.

There's a bit over half an hour of music here, and it's valuable primarily for Muir's presence, but Parker turns in a classy performance which can't be denied. Paul Rogers will perhaps always be thought of as the saxophonist's second-choice bassman, which would be unfair, because he plays beautifully here, working closely with both players to create a layered ensemble sound in which everything is tied together without losing its sharpness of focus.

The remainder of the CD -- half an hour, because like most Emanem releases this is pretty packed -- is taken up by a quartet gig from 1991. Parker and Rogers are joined by Mark Sanders, a percussionist on whom so much praise has been heaped in these pages that it would be redundant to add more, and trombonist Wolter Wierbos.

Wierbos is a Dutch player who Parker nabbed during a brief visit to London. He plays with a firmness reminiscent of George Lewis, and works wonderfully with Parker, so that the two are able, with what appears to be complete relaxation, to spin a pair of contrapuntal lines for for many minutes at a time.

This is a much more jazzy set than the one with Jamie Muir, with a cymbal-tickling pulse from Sanders, solos and a generally swinging feel. It's relatively laid-back, though, and although it hots up occasionally it's nice to hear such a chatty dialogue between the two. Regrettably, it seems that the oppressive heat of a London pub in August overcame the Dutchman, who drops out two-thirds of the way through and never returns. But by then he's amply proved his mettle, and fortunately label boss Martin Davidson was there to capture the whole thing for posterity.

The interaction between Parker and Wierbos is a joy to listen to, and immediately one wants to hear more of it. Of course, the saxophonist is known for his penchant for duets, and although this one is a quartet it's very much divided between rhythm and front-line. One hopes that one day the pair will record together some more. This set has moments of stunning synchronicity between the two, and there's a real sense of fun and adventure about their meeting.

One duet which is a bit of a surprise is the one documented by Parker's latest release on Leo Records. The other party in this case is pianist Scheyder, Chopin interpreter and period instrument type; on paper it sounds more like a clash of cultures than a meeting of minds. Parker, of course, loves this sort of thing.

Classical musicians doing improv can, of course, be a horrible mess, but Scheyder does well here. His playing owes a thing or two to the high Modernists, as you might expect, but Chopin's simple-sounding complexity is here as well, his cool avoidance of the big sweeping gestures of Romanticism. He is, in other words, a very able improviser.

This set from 2000 finds Parker in a sensitive mood (one thinks, briefly, of "Time Will Tell", except that Scheyder

is nothing at all like Paul Bley). The saxophonist cleaves to his parter by playing a melodic kind of jazz which remains entirely in his own voice, moving deliberately from cool to hot waters but staying mainly in the former. The recording strongly disfavours Scheyder, which is a bit of a shame, but the music is really superb.

These two releases are from different ends of Parker's universe, and both contain essential music. There will be listeners who favour any one of the three sets, depending on temperament: hardcore improv fans will adore the trio with Muir, free jazz aficionados will love what Wierbos does, and those who like Parker's softer (but no less adventurous) side will enjoy the duets with Scheyder. Most Parker fans, however, should get both discs without delay.

Richard Cochrane

Evan Parker: 2 x 3 = 5

([Leo](#): CDLR305)

Evan Parker (saxophones), Alex von Schlippenbach (piano), Barry Guy (bass), Paul Lovens (drums), Paul Lytton (drums)

Was it coincidence or bizarre choice that Parker should kick off this epic hour-and-a-quarter jam with the same five notes which open "A Love Supreme", played with almost exactly the same inflection? Probably the former, but it's a very odd moment every time you put it on. It's not the only one, either.

Not that there's anything gimmicky here; it is just as it appears, a quintet session of reeds, piano, bass and double percussion. It does some of the expected things, with breakdowns into trios and duets, whether planned or not, giving shape and variety to the piece.

It's Parker's sound which is extraordinary here, nothing like what we're accustomed to. He attacks the music with an iron tone on tenor, sounding like Pharaoh Sanders, at the height of his powers, having just dropped something heavy on his foot. Parker roars through this set, playing all sorts of things which will surprise even those who know his music well.

Partly it's the presence of Schlippenbach which explains this. The two have worked regularly together for many years, and although this side of Parker's work is less well-known, it's clearly something he feels deeply connected with. And what they play is jazz; Schlippenbach, on this session, is under the considerable shadow of Cecil Taylor. As for the saxophonist's approach, one is reminded of another atypical Parker record, "The Fire Tale", his duet with the barnstorming Borah Bergman.

Parts of that session didn't really work -- for all that Parker might like to be a high-energy tearaway, he works best when he has room to manoeuvre -- and there are sections here which don't quite happen for the same reasons. To be fair on the saxophonist, however, he does blow for all he's worth, and while this may not win any awards for subtlety the quality of his playing at such full tilt is still exceptionally high.

Putting Lytton and Lovens together was a recipe for only one thing, and that's what you get: in the quiet passages a pitter-pattering and in the loud passages a wall of continuously exploding noise. Again, not much room for nuances, but that seems most definitely not to have to have been what this group was formed to do.

Schlippenbach, for instance, spends much of his time whaling on the keyboard with more enthusiasm than judgement, but when he takes a solo it's typically thoughtful and full of ingenious development. As members of the group join him, they shore him up more and more, but they can't maintain the momentum. Guy starts a soloistic contribution, the group wobbles and -- gasp -- the music suddenly peters out.

They pick it up, of course, but this seems illustrative of the sacrifice one makes when playing music of this density. Even people as smart and quick-witted as these guys will falter if they try to get too clever. The reason this is a problem is that it isn't really comfortable ground for any of them, and there are times when, quite honestly, they all sound a bit lost.

All of which makes the record sound like a disaster, which it isn't. It's natural that a single improvisation of such length will have dodgy moments. Many listeners will be happy enough with the payoff between the attention to detail for which all of these players are known and the exhilarating energy they're reaching for here. Those who have seen him live will know that Parker can raise the roof when he wants to, and this was obviously one of those occasions. This writer, however, would be surprised if he chose to record like this, with this group, in the more reflective atmosphere of the studio.

Richard Cochrane

Parker/Rowe: Dark Rags

([Potlatch](#): P200)

Evan Parker (tenor sax), Keith Rowe (guitar)

This does indeed remind one of the raags of Hindustan, as much of Parker's music does, opening with a slow meditation on two or three notes and building slowly into an impressive edifice, with each pattern seeming to be born from the previous one. Not that Rowe pursues any analogous path; his textural playing was a revolution in the early days of AMM, and remains stubbornly itself. In a way, that makes him a great partner for the saxophonist, who can cleave to his partner as much as he wishes, but only that much, trusting Rowe to respond with contrast more often than repetition.

For those who haven't heard it, Rowe's electric guitar will be an astonishment. He creates enormous soundscapes (a word he doubtless despises) and sounds much more like a player of electronics to the uninformed ear. This puts Parker's very organic, acoustic sax into interesting territory, and while he's worked with actual electronics in the past, this seems more comfortable than his playing with someone who relies mostly on what he plays for a sound-source. Parker likes contrast, and here he gets it in large doses.

Adding to the dubious parallel with North Indian music, the programme here consists of two long (40-minute) performances. The music feels slow and leisurely compared with Parker's acoustic small-group music, although it must have been exhausting to play. Parker ruminates over little knots of notes, teasing at them as they mutate into fresh material, while Rowe sets up great grinding backdrops and pushes them around like thick paint on a canvas.

On occasion, too, Rowe picks up some talk radio station, either on his pickups or on an actual radio. This just adds to the rather spaced-out, almost Stockhausenian (a word for which apologies are due, but it's too late) quality of this music. It seems to float high in the atmosphere, as much of AMM's music does. One is reminded of the pleasure Parker takes in meeting duo partners halfway and here, in a field of marked musical contrasts, that leaning-in is quite audible. Not in anything so superficial as instrumental sound or small-scale organisation but in the big musical philosophy. An impressive and unusual recording; those who don't know Rowe's music are particularly urged to check it out, but Parker fans will love it too.

Richard Cochrane

Evan Parker & Richard Nunns: Rangigua

([Leo](#): CDLR314)

Evan Parker (saxophones), Richard Nunns (taonga puoro)

Evan Parker has a long history of documenting duets with unusual partners. Often, as here, the music is exploratory, and sometimes the results are tantalisingly half-formed. Parker, despite his distinctive sound, is a legendarily flexible player, changing strategies depending on the approach of his current partner, an attitude which probably accounts for the unusually high success rate these discs seem to exhibit.

Nunns is a practitioner of Taonga Puoro, traditional Maori music. It is, as the helpful and beautifully-illustrated liner informs us, played on instruments which have very narrow ranges and many of which are rather resistant to sound-production. They must be played, it seems, with iron resolve and much practice, and the sounds they make are not in the least bit flashy; the pieces here are all fairly short, probably on account of the limited range of each instrument. They are, however, played with great sensitivity to timbre and with a certain element of ritual, both things which must have appealed to the saxophonist.

The first impression is rather startling; Parker, for all his knowledge of some of the world's most forbiddingly alien musics, sounds unsure of what to do with the simple clicking, whistling, knocking and breathing noises which Nunn produces. This isn't simply a musical culture-clash -- more an art-form clash, or a clash of the whole massive structure of Western art with something else.

It certainly throws into relief just how accessible Parker's music actually is, with its attachment to linear melody, its cycling groups of notes and vocalised pitch-bends, its pulsing, flowing rhythms and refined sonorities. "Pukaea Rakau Kauri" makes the point neatly, with Nunn's wooden trumpet braying hollow notes, always the same pitch, each time tongued or dynamically varied in a different way. Around it Parker's tenor works its way up to a spiralling dance.

This piece is one of the nicest, a place where the contrast really works. There are others, too: with the maaire flute, for example, which Nunn overblows to excellent effect, or a jade bullroarer whose revving-engine noise works bizarrely well for the saxophonist. But the delicacy of Nunn's instruments and his reliance on tiny nuances are sometimes trampled by Parker however hard he tries (and he tries, audibly, very hard indeed) to be quiet and sympathetic. It's the percussion instruments which fare badly here; Nunn has none of the rhythmic dynamism Parker is used to, and playing a single sound repeatedly for minutes at a time not only gives little for the reedsman to bounce off but it just gets in the way, mesmerising as it may be in other contexts.

Sometimes, particularly at the beginnings of tracks, Parker can be heard racking his brain for something to play, which is a wonderful sound in itself. It's great to hear a man so well-established still getting himself into these kinds of musically dicey situations. Nunn is clearly a master performer in an extremely odd field of music which probably has to be seen live to be really appreciated, but the mismatch here is regularly entrertaining and just occasionally sublime. Not the most fully-formed music that Mr Parker will release this year, but almost certainly the least expected.

Richard Cochrane

Iskra 1903: Chapter One, 1970-2

([Emanem](#): CDLR287)

Paul Rutherford (trombone, piano), Derek Bailey (guitar), Barry Guy (bass)

Parker/Guy/Lytton/Crispell: After Appleby

([Leo](#): CDLR283/284)

Evan Parker (saxophones), Barry Guy (bass), Paul Lytton (drums), Marilyn Crispell (piano)

Two releases by what one might refer to (without wishing to be indelicate) as veterans of the London improvised music scene, one new and one long-unavailable, both featuring the mighty Barry Guy in two extremely different settings.

Iskra 1903 was one of the legendary early improv groups, a trio of players who became, during its four-year existence, some of the biggest names in what was, and remains, a tiny but international scene. This triple-CD reissues two old Incus LPs which, if you have them, probably need replacing by now, and it packs in over an hour of previously unreleased material from the same period.

The two main incarnations of the group -- from 1970 and 1972 -- sound surprisingly different. The first disk finds the group at their inception, playing rather cool music in an edgy, aggressive manner. Bailey, in particular, plays his amplified acoustic with ferocious disregard to polite musical values, popping and rattling when one expects quietude. Having said all of which, this trio seems to love space above all, and although the three play with commitment and more than a little bite, the silence into which they propel their revolutionary sounds sets them off and makes the music simultaneously relaxed and uncomfortable.

The second disc finds the group two years later with a somewhat more finessed sound, but the dedication to raw acoustic impact within small sounds and big spaces remains unchanged. "Acoustic" because, as is often said of this kind of playing, one is made very much aware of the material presence of the instruments involved, although in fact both Bailey and Guy play amplified on these disks, with the former already deploying his influential but immediately identifiable volume pedal technique.

"After Appleby", on the other hand, is the latest release from Parker's occasional quartet -- actually his regular trio with Lytton and Guy, augmented by the never-disappointing Crispell. Parker fans will be strongly reminded of another Parker disk, "Time Will Tell", one of his most accessible and popular, which featured the same line-up with Paul Bley instead of Crispell.

There's the same limpid, almost ECM-esque sense of reserve in some of these pieces, particularly the first, on which the pianist sounds as if she might drift at any moment into a reading of "As Time Goes By". It's not all mellow free jazz, though; the following, extended track somewhat reprises Parker's duets with Eddie Prevost on "Most Material", Lytton skittering about the metal bits of his kit and Guy mimicking bowed cymbals or a stuttering floor tom.

All of which is to put things rather simplistically. As with any of Parker's more jazzy records, there's a vast amount of variety on these two CDs (one a studio session, the other live at the Vortex, London). For a start, the three big pieces (nearly 100 minutes of music in themselves) are interspersed with duets and a trio. That's a brave thing to do because it can lend a disjointed feel to a CD programme, but here it works well because it's clearly been carefully thought out.

Each of these non-quartet pieces is beautiful in itself, and all share a very similar musical approach, which means that during a casual listen one is not aware of shifting personnel so much as of a multi-levelled performance. In long, single-piece improvisations, it's common in any case for one or two musicians to sit out for a while; maybe this is, conceptually, just a development from that. There's a general sense of continuity between these pieces which gives them the feel of a continuous performance while the changes in line-up keep it varied on closer inspection (not that this quartet needs such a fillip, really, enthralling as they are).

Both releases are, in their own ways, inexhaustable sources of pleasure. The Iskra release is, one might argue, a matter of archive documentation, but this music sounds as brilliant and alive as ever and across three very full CDs the experience is never less than scintillating. What Parker's latest disk represents is something very different, the latest missive from a quartet which will doubtless be viewed as one of the classic jazz groups of its time. Snap them both up next pay day and regret nothing.

Richard Cochrane

John Bickerton Trio: Shadow Boxes

([Leo Lab](#): CD064)

John Bickerton (piano), Matthew Heyner (bass), Rashid Bakr (drums)

Mario Pavone Trio: Remembering Thomas

([Knitting Factory Records](#): KFR257)

Mario Pavone (bass), Peter Madsen (piano), Matt Wilson (drums)

Piano trios are one of the standard formats for testing out ideas or making statements in jazz and improvised music, just as the solo piano is for composers of new classical music. Its very standardised nature makes it transparent: it has a history, but it's also something we accept automatically, leaving us free to stop worrying about whether the instrumentation really works and get down to the business of listening to the notes.

Both of these records are about notes, really, and they're both about compositions, although Pavone's more so than Bickerton's. Bickerton's trio play his own compositions, while Pavone's play Thomas Chapin's; the former often shoot off at free-improvised tangents, the former have harmonic structures which give each of the freer passages its own distinctive taste. Two approaches, then, to similar ideas.

Bickerton's compositions are wonderful things, reminiscent of Mary Lou Williams's, Monkish but in an updated way, bringing dissonance and that apparently awkward grace to the fore and letting swing transform into the pulse of free improvisation. "Stilts and Pirouettes" is impossibly catchy, and the theme of "Meeting after Dark" has a big pinch of Mal Waldron's lovely, unsentimental balladry stirred into it before launching into a firework display. Heyner is a real powerhouse on the bass, a big, loud, thumping player and, although he sticks close to the pianist most of the time, he's constantly contributing something interesting.

Bickerton's examinations of the prepared piano don't fare so well; they just seem pointlessly noisy, the notes blunted or rattling without great purpose, the whole thing becoming too bludgeoning to be effective. A shame, but it doesn't happen too often, and even when it does his partners pick up the slack and keep your interest going. Bakr is a strange fish, taking a polyrhythmic approach to everything else, so that he sounds perfectly in time with himself and drifts in and out of phase with Bickerton and Heyner. That's a great tactic, one which most free jazz drummers employ now and again, but Bakr makes a trademark of it. No complaints from this writer: when it's done well, as it is here, it can sound like the most natural thing in the world.

The Bickerton Trio disc is full of verve and excitement. It's a loud, even frenetic slice of jazz, but the leader's compositions keep on surprising. There's a dreadful tendency in free jazz for heads to be written in a who-cares manner, as if they were just launching pads for the solos, and the solos are, naturally, what we're all interested in. Bickerton won't have it, it seems: the tunes he writes have to be right, and their complex, sophisticated construction is always going to be rewarding.

If Bickerton's compositions swing like hell even as the band are dissolving swing into the deconstructed rhythms of improv, Mario Pavone's trio swings hard in a much more traditional manner. Playing Chapin's tunes can't be any easier than playing Bickerton's -- they're full of the weirdest little catches. Horrible as it is to mention Monk again in the context of piano trios, still, there's a similarity which is hard to avoid. They sound simple enough, until you realise they're not: they're fiendishly complicated, but made from really very simple materials. Just as there's a kind of reverse-logic to Monk tunes which makes them so counter-intuitive to play, so Chapin, in his more lushly Romantic way, has put some nasty little hooks into these pieces to catch out the unwary.

Pianist Madsen absolutely *launches* himself into these performances. He seems to love the tunes, and know them inside-out; he just presses the keys down and out comes this forceful, slick, whirling music. Make no mistake, this stuff is much, much tamer than what Bickerton's trio plays, but Madsen's energy, constrained as it is within Chapin's structures, just boils to get out. And sometimes, as jazz groups often do, they abandon the changes and turn freestyle, becoming, briefly, as wild and fiery in their own way as anyone this side of Cecil Taylor.

Wilson and Pavone do more than take care of business in the rhythm department. Although wedded firmly to bebop time, they have an enormous flexibility and they can loosen up the seams of Chapin's compositions to the point where they seem to billow out, mis-shapen but airborne. They're an impressive trio indeed, and Chapin's compositions could hardly have found a more sympathetic or a more imaginative home.

Two piano trios, then, and two different approaches to the medium. Bickerton playing his own compositions, doing something edgy and demanding, and pulling it off most of the time. On top form, the Bickerton trio's album is triumphant, but there are low points, too, as there so often are in this kind of music. Pavone, on the other hand, plays it safer but gets consistently good results. Which to prefer is largely a matter of taste; both records are hugely enjoyable.

Ivo Perelman: Brazilian Watercolour (Leo: CDLR266)

Ivo Perelman (tenor sax, recorder, piano), Matthew Shipp (piano), Rashied Ali (drums), Guilherme Franco (percussion, wooden flute), Cyro Baptista (percussion, wooden flute)

"En Adir" was Perelman's take on the Jewish musics which he grew up with and which influenced him so strongly. This album may not complete the picture, but it adds a significant piece. What immediately strikes you in the line-up -- and in the music -- is that there's no bass player. Expecting to hear William Parker weaving his way through Ali's rhythmic maze as he does on Perelman's trio disc *Sad Life*, the listener instead finds Franco and Baptista's high-pitched membranophones. Odd? Well, no odder than finding the volcanic tenorist tackling "Desafinado", I suppose.

Even the pianist's left hand can't fill the bass role on most tracks, because he isn't on them; this is two sessions, one in duet with Shipp, the other with the three percussionists. They do, however, fit together nicely and there's no sense of this being a "broken-backed" disk. Indeed, the variety they lend is very welcome.

The term "watercolour" usually indicates a transparent, deliberately simplistic lyricism which aims at quietude rather than passion. In that sense, it's a misleading title. While many people will know Stan Getz's limpid version of "Desafinado", Perelman's may come as a shock. He virtually -- not completely, but virtually -- abandons the melody, fragmenting it into a series of harsh ostinati and pitting them against a 2/4 samba-like rhythm cooked up by Ali, Franco and Baptista. "Summer Samba", another Latin Jazz staple, gets a quick, gruff run-through before Perelman starts interrogating it and opening up its intervallic structure for inspection, eventually leaving it entirely behind except for a faint flavour. When it returns at the end, however, it's as if it never went away.

The effect of a sax plus three percussionists -- two of whom are very obviously Latin-schooled -- is interesting. The comparison is bound to be made with Gato Barbieri's "Latin America" series, but this music is really quite different. Where Barbieri played some astonishing music in those sessions, the sound is much less coherently fused with free jazz than it is on this disc. Ali fits into proceedings like a hand in a glove without having to change his customary style at all, setting rhythmic puzzles for his partners as complex as chess problems. Oh, and on two very brief quartet tracks, Perelman plays piano. Rather like a lot of people who play "free" piano as a second or third instrument, he sounds untutored and more interested in gesture than pitch for the most part. "Pandeiros", though, turned out nice and funky and this listener wanted more of it.

The duets with Shipp are different again. They retain something of the flavour of Brazilian music, but it's a much more distant echo. It's nice to compare them with the duets with Borah Bergman which Perelman recorded a couple of years ago; where those are knotty and rigorous, this music is much more relaxed, and indeed much quieter. Perelman grapples with melodies as if he were hauling himself aboard a ship in a gale, and Shipp, wonderfully sensitive accompanist that he is, carefully nudges Perelman along rather than continually knocking him sideways as Bergman (very enjoyably) always does with his duettists. A duet with Bergman generally sounds like a good-humoured wrestling match; Perelman and Shipp seem to be sitting down, late at night, having a discussion over a bottle of wine. The rapport is tangible. It's a very pleasant listen indeed.

Richard Cochrane

Ivo Perelman: Sieiro

([Leo](#): CDLR271)

Ivo Perelman (tenor sax, tenor trombone), Tomas Ulrich (cello), Dominic Duval (bass), Jay Rosen (drums)

The names on this disc will be known to many readers of Musings, and they've all played with one another from time to time in the past, although in such an unstable music scene it's likely that this combination -- despite being billed as "The Ivo Perelman Quartet" -- is but a sporadic one. The session slightly predates that which resulted in *The Alexander Suite*, on which Perelman, Duval and Ulrich were joined by the other two members of Duval's CT String Quartet.

It's easy to characterise Perelman as an old-fashioned free jazz screamer, a follower of Pharoah Sanders and the like despite the fact that he evolved his own style in Brazil, independently of the US scene. He certainly has a lot of energy on this disc, and where sometimes that can be unfocussed, as it was rather on the ambitious *Brazilian Watercolour* from earlier this year, here he's on the same confident, strong-toned form as he was on *The Alexander Suite*. That screaming, reach-for-the-skies stuff is only one thing he does, after all, and the fact that he's a tenor player makes him easy to pigeonhole, unfairly, on the basis of that side of his personality.

Presumably, those who think of Perelman as a hectoring, blues-based noise-maker are going to have a surprise when they hit the achingly beautiful "Santana", with its melody which keeps on curling around in unexpected directions, or the lovely lines which appear halfway through "Rush Hour" and create great dynamic tension with the more forceful stuff elsewhere on that track. This writer has said before (probably several times) that Perelman's use of melody is something quite unique on the current musical scene; well, here it sounds as good as it ever has on record, and that means very good indeed.

The fact that the quartet members are all well-known to one another will come as no surprise to anyone who hears this session. Rosen and Duval are a regular rhythm section who have that close understanding which leads to the spouting of clichés about telepathy. No, it's not telepathy; it's shared musical methods and long-practised expertise at the game of free jazz with its waves of energy, its constant flow of ideas around the group and its palpable sense of attenuated concentration. Rosen has a crisp attack which is really welcome in this kind of music because it never muddies things (muddy free jazz can be a pretty awful experience) and Duval's bass seems able to go anywhere and do anything.

Ulrich is the wild card here, at least on paper. If he were a pianist, it would be a classic bebop quartet; if a trumpeter, a classic free jazz formation. But no, he's a cellist. Surprisingly, it isn't odd at all. Remember, Duval often plays with the bow, and he and Ulrich are able to construct an active, moving but not over-dense texture which a pianist would find far more difficult to achieve. That's the chief virtue of this session, aside from the great playing all round: its lightness. Free jazz, especially the sort most often called "energy music", is often hulking and loud. This group manage to make it float like a butterfly and sting like a bee, and the way they do it is by making sure everyone has the space to move around in what can sometimes be very hectic music.

This is a CD to remind you of how extraordinary Perelman can be when he's on form, and when joined by really top-class musicians. It's not going to help him go mainstream and get signed by Columbia, but this writer suspects that's of no interest unless the mainstream comes to him. He's doing something which can be hard to understand, or rather easy to misunderstand, and he demands our attention. If you own nothing by him, get it immediately.

Richard Cochrane

Ivo Perelman: The Eye Listens

([Boxholder](#): BXH012)

Ivo Perelman (reeds), Wilbur Morris (bass), Michael Wimberley (drums)

As ever, it's Perelman's superb sense of linear development and melodic expressivity which impresses on this trio set. Such a stripped-down setting is a great way to hear the saxophonist, just as it is for Ayler and Brotzmann, the two players with whom he is most often, and most unhelpfully, compared.

Like Ayler, Perelman has a genius for taking a melodic line and pulling it into different shapes, a singing quality which favours simple, cellular melodic material but serpentine, oblique developments of it. Like Brotzmann, he has achieved mastery of the extremes of his horn. But what he does is really not much like either of them, reminiscent though it may be.

There are just five pieces here, which offer the opportunity to hear Perelman developing music at rather greater length than usual, three of them being substantially longer than anything else this writer is aware of in his catalogue. Live, however, he has been known to discourse at length on his chosen subject, and it's nice that this time we have some more expansive performances on CD.

Morris and Wimberley formed two-thirds of a trio with Charles Gayle on at least one occasion ("Testament" on Knitting Factory), and that was probably good experience for this gig, although Perelman's tone and approach is a good deal less belligerent. The music is characteristically firey here, though, and all three men have to run to keep up with it. This is exactly the kind of thing which works well for Perelman, who appears to be having the time of his life. Both Morris and Wimberley get generous solo space; Wimberley turns in a nice solo on the title track, but otherwise the main attraction is the trio itself and its rush of energy.

This isn't the saxophonist's most subtle record by a long chalk, but it's joyfully exuberant and Perelman is on top of his game. Morris and (particularly) Wimberley offer strong support; in short, this is a blast from start to finish. And in the details, Perelman's melodic and (increasingly) timbral intelligence is perfectly in evidence. A worthy addition to the discography of a player whose place as one of the most impressive tenor players of his generation can now hardly be doubted.

Richard Cochrane

Ivo Perelman: The Seven Energies of the Universe

([Leo Lab](#): CD309)

Ivo Perelman (tenor sax), Joseph Scianni (piano), Jay Rosen (drums)

Siwula/Cherry/Arnal: Badlands

([Cadence](#): CJR1120)

Blaise Siwula (alto sax), Vattel Cherry (bass), Jeff Arnal (drums)

Two energetic free jazz trios here; one led by Ivo Perelman, who is a bankable name despite not quite having had the big success that some of us hoped a couple of years ago ("the next David S Ware", some people said, but Ware had become far more accessible than Perelman, and anyway he hardly made it into the celebrity stratosphere afterwards). The other is led by Siwula, who's worked with Cecil Taylor along with his bass player on this session. Such things are a little misleading, however; the cult of celebrity, even in such a minority field as free jazz, tempts us to look at the leaders when a jazz trio is or should be a group undertaking, especially such hyperactive ones as these.

Siwula is that rara avis, a technically prodigious free jazz specialist who has genuinely studied and integrated some of the extended techniques beloved of European practitioners. Here he intersperses short but not throwaway solo tracks amidst the five (mainly substantial) trio performances. His range goes from straight jazz to the key-popping, reed-rasping effects more readily associated with the likes of John Butcher. He has the strong melodic sense one expects of an American jazzman, however, and the solos work because they tell little melodic stories from a broad palette. That may not sound sophisticated, but it certainly works.

The band swing like madmen. Cherry is absolutely in his element here, and Arnal batters his ride cymbal until, at the end, one suspects it would look as if it had been run over by trucks. Cherry's ability to weave melodic ideas in and out of the dense web of sound they create is a revelation, and his solo statements are eloquent and even, at times, rather magisterial. Above all, his sound is muscular and, unlike so many acoustic bassists in such roqdy company as this, he makes his presence felt as a equal partner in the business of making frantically inventive music happen.

As a result, this recording is an absolute joy. Its ability to create and manage astonishing complexity without ending up in cacophony is supernatural, and the capacity for the group to move into quieter but no less dynamic sections, whether to facilitate their own recovery or ours, is impressive too.

Perelman is another player with a taste for loud, demanding situations, and trio releases like "[The Eye Listens](#)" are easily comparable with the set above. This one, too, is quick and sometimes aggressive, but there is a subtlety here which was missing from "The Eye Listens" and which is most welcome in Perelman's work.

Perelman can, you see, be an exhaustingly confrontational player. He revels in the extreme high register, in punctuating his playing with screams or grinding, repetitive growls. He plays hard and loud, and expects his accompanists to keep up. This, however, is where Scianni and Rosen really show their quality. Both are perfectly capable of playing fast and loud, but that's not the hard part, as everybody knows; the hard part is playing fast and loud and co-operatively and with intelligence. It's what makes this music just about as hard as jazz gets; anyone can do it badly, but it's terribly, terribly hard to do well.

This is just what the rhythm section manage here. Scianni is a revelation, a player of lovely, rapturous things which explode into galaxies of notes at the slightest provocation. Rosen, like Scianni, plays everything pin-sharp, and the recording picks out every details of what they do. This is enormously refreshing compared with the way much free jazz gets recorded, and indeed played, and Perelman is to be thanked for his generosity in giving plenty of space to his collaborators.

Not that he's a shrinking violet, however. He is one of the few players on whom one can always rely to leap into a situation feet-first and furiously play all over it. And in such smart and responsive company, he is able to make plain the absolute lack of interest he has in emotive "screaming" or "roaring", and the entirely melodic ends to which such extraordinary energies are concentrated in his vocabulary. As his voice matures, Perelman is becoming more challenging, not less, and his presence as the grumpy, truculent old veteran of the future is much anticipated. This is the best thing this writer has heard from him for a while, and one of the best bands he's recorded with. Both disks are recommended to those who like their jazz hot, opinionated and clever, like a Tom Paulin Vindaloo.

Richard Cochrane

Phantom City: Shiva Recoil -- Live/Unlive

(Virgin: AMBT21)

Paul Schütze (keyboards and tapes), Raoul Björkenheim (guitar), Toshinori Kondo (trumpet), Alex Buess (bass clarinet), Bill Laswell (bass), Dirk Wachtelaer (drums)

Paul Schütze's work has the kind of directionlessness which might have lead him into the isolationist flotation tank. Certainly, he shares with those more austere practitioners -- Thomas Köner, Zoviet*France, Jim O'Rourke et al -- an obsession with texture and a suspicion of traditional conceptions of form, but Schütze has long augmented this with real-time improvisation and a kind of go-nowhere pulse reminiscent of Can's Jacki Liebezeit.

Here, he directs a live performance by previous collaborators, most of whom appeared on last year's towering Site Anubis but who contributed by tape (as a "virtual band") rather than by playing together. The result is immediately more accessible, a kind of fractured funk unable to wholly escape the shadow of Miles Davis' 70s revolution. The presence of the towering Bill Laswell contributes to this quality, his fretless bulging out of the group sound as the de facto leader, even if Schütze is conducting from the back with his often subliminal pre-recorded textures.

The two pieces are free-improvised but mostly fall into a solo-plus-accompaniment paradigm, although nothing stays still for very long. As ever, there are transcendent events, and periods of treading water; fortunately, this band treads water more elegantly than most.

Raoul Björkenheim has an admirable stab at making distorted electric guitar sound interesting, and seems to play a lot more than either Alex Buess (a good choice to sub for Coxhill) or Toshinori Kondo. The latter sometimes sounds like an ersatz Dave "Masada" Douglas here, but this is hardly a recording to judge him on and he judiciously opts for a textural role rather than grandstanding. At the best moments, these three merge into a single instrument -- Buess seems almost to be playing through some kind of filter, so thin and trebly is his bass clarinet, and his penchant for split harmonics blends especially closely with the guitar.

Meanwhile, Dirk Wachtelaer handles trap set responsibilities brilliantly in the more Schützean passages which drift on a rolling pulse, less brilliantly when the electronics whip the band into pounding four-square funk. In these latter passages, his ability to listen sometimes gives way to rather buttoned-down prog-rock riffs and tricky fills, but this is a minor complaint when so much of this recording is as rhythmically involving as it is. The final minutes comprise an ecstatic percussion dual between Wachtelaer and Schütze in which the two become indistinguishable, taking the concept of the drum solo and turning it inside out -- exactly the kind of thing Schütze does best.

Perhaps inevitably, this on-stage incarnation of Schütze leaves some of the magic at the studio door. In his previous work, live acoustic music-making shades imperceptibly into electronics -- it seems to take as a theme the blurring of those boundaries, and the question mark which hovers over free improv values like spontaneity and interaction. On stage, there is a muso gleam, and too sharp a division of labour. Comparisons aside, however, this is as enjoyable an album of electrified jazz as will come out all year and a gentle introduction to Schütze's sometimes forbidding sound-world.

Richard Cochrane

Paul Plimley & Trichy Sankaran: Ivory Ganesh meets Doctor Drums

([Songlines](#): SGL1523-2)

Paul Plimley (piano), Trichy Sankaran (mrdangam, kanjira)

The fact that this disc is a very easy listen shouldn't lead anyone to dismiss it as easy listening. The fact that Plimley likes to play tunes which have a tonal centre shouldn't imply he's a reactionary. He did, after all, study with Cecil Taylor at the end of the seventies, which seems to have been a huge influence on his playing, and he's worked with a roll-call of avant gardists from Derek Bailey to Jon Oswald to Andrew Cyrille.

So what's he doing making an album of jazzy improvisations with a Karnatic drummer? Well, as Andrew Timar points out in his excellent notes, this is no novelty project. Sankaran and Plimley have been playing together for half a dozen years by the time this session was recorded, and they had reached a certain aesthetic which they obviously wanted to document. This unites Plimley's Taylor-derived concept of the piano as a primarily rhythmic instrument with Sankaran's very Indian approach to percussion as a matter of tuning and melodic inflexion.

The results are, to quote Timar again, redolent of "Satie in colourful madras plaid lounge attire". There is certainly that decadent elegance in this music which is also in, say, Arthur Lyman's; that exotic, sophisticated beauty which is a million miles from the pop pap of "world music". And underlying the gin and martini, the epicure's love of India as a home of fine cuisine and civilised manners, the strong desire to listen to this CD under a slowly rotating fan in an art deco bar with peeling pink walls and decaying rubber plants, all the trappings of the end of the Raj -- underlying all that there's something of genuine musical worth going on here.

That's because the two players have built up a rapport which enables their music to really flow. The way they toss rhythmic ideas back and forth is electric, and as Plimley superimposes his melodic and harmonic ideas on this rhythmic core, Sankaran, quite independently, adds his timbral ones. It's as if the two are perfectly in step in one dimension of the music, and quite happy to do their own thing in others. The result: captivating music you can't take your ears off.

Agreed, this isn't cutting-edge experimentalism, but it's more experimental than you expect. The two players interrogate their different relationships to rhythm through the medium of a close shared understanding, but there's little compromise. It's not as if Sankaran is playing jazz or Plimley is playing Karnatic music. They're doing their own thing but, it seems, with very closely worked-out relationships between the different parts, which makes for a fascinating and surprising listen. It's not the most difficult thing you'll hear all year, but extremely enjoyable and not a little thought-provoking, too.

Richard Cochrane

The Remote Viewers: Obliques before Pale Skin

([Leo Lab](#): CD063)

Adrian Northover (saxophones, theremin), Louise Petts (saxophones, voice, synth, theremin), David Petts (saxophones, synth, theremin)

The Poison Cabinet: Dark Embrace

([The General Ear](#): GE4)

Louise Petts (voice, electronics), David Petts (tenor sax, electronics)

The Petts are one of London's best-kept secrets. They gig rarely, as their music crosses categories of new composition, rock, jazz and free improv, although it isn't really any of those things, and the electronics they use can make playing tiny club nights a headache. Yet what they do is perfectly unique, and they continue to stubbornly plough their furrow despite the obvious difficulties it presents.

With fellow saxophonist Northover, they form The Remote Viewers, for whom this is the second release on Leo (you can read about their first [here](#)). A very assured piece of work it is too, with covers of songs by Van Heusen, Tiomkin and Madonna sitting alongside David Petts's trademark compositions. These latter are hard to get at first; they seem deliberately ugly, atavistically complicated and lumpy at the same time. But that, in a way, is what he's after, a music which is built on a severe and distinctly un-cuddly framework.

You only have to see a photograph of them, really; they're one of the few British avant garde bands who have a "look". For them it's a sort of thirties style, all dark suits and drapery, as if T S Eliot's bank clerks worked on high modernist sculpture and read Wittgenstein at the weekend. The music has a strong modernist feel, but that's just a part of what they do. They also cover songs by Madonna, for example, not in an ironic, po-mo sort of way but just because they like the chord changes. There's a real sense of enjoyment in this sometimes austere, sometimes noisy but always very disciplined music.

When Northover isn't around, Petts and Petts still make music, this time under the rubric of The Poison Cabinet, and they release about one cassette a year on the General Ear label. As David Petts composes all the music for both groups, and Louise Petts writes all the words, there are plenty of similarities here, but there are a surprising amount of differences, too. Northover makes up a sax trio in The Remote Viewers, which gives them the opportunity to explore thick, reedy contrapuntal textures. With the Poison Cabinet, there's more emphasis on the electronics and on songwriting. Their release is, as a result, far more accessible to those coming from a rock background. It's also a good place to hear David Petts's wonderful and much-underrated tenor playing in a more exposed setting, which is always good. This, their fourth cassette, is the best so far; the electronics sound more assured, and the recording quality is, considering the medium, impeccable.

Both releases have moments of sheer beauty as well as the angular compositions for which David Petts is known (and ought to be better-known; this writer likes to think of someone doing a jazz album of Petts tunes, but they're tricky, for sure). "Creatures of Distance" is a lovely piece composed of dissonant, drifting synth chords with saxophones thickening the texture, moving gradually into simultaneous soloing of the sort that the trio do extremely well. Although hard to describe, the music these people make is easy to recommend. Check it out if you haven't already done so.

Richard Cochrane

Ponga

([Loosegroove](#): Igoo18-2)

Wayne Horvitz (keyboards), Bobby Previte (drums), Skerik (sax), Dave Palmer (keyboards)

Peddalling superb fusion from two old hands and two relative newcomers, Ponga are everything that's right about jazz-rock and none of what's wrong about it. A quick resume: what's wrong about it is fiddly, smart-alek compositions, pointless virtuosity and an overall sound which smooths out the rhythmic complexities of jazz and replaces them with superficial complications like playing in 13/8. None of that here.

And for the sceptics, yes, there was something right with it. The sheer, driving excitement was the main thing, and the dialectical engagement with rock, sworn enemy of free jazz, was another. Good jazz-rock didn't embrace the enemy which, at the time, was sucking money out of jazz and forcing the musicians to switch careers. No, it transformed rock into something it always had the potential to be; sophisticated and multi-layered like jazz with the density and driving duple rhythms of its opposite pole.

So here, press release comparisons with drum 'n' bass are not to be taken at face value. As everyone knows, "jazzy drum 'n' bass" is a hideous melange of lounchy Grover Washingtonisms and heavily diluted breaks. Bobby Previte certainly has some jungly riffs under his sticks, but they're not the main attraction here, just as Horvitz and Palmer, while they do trigger samples from their keyboards now and again, are hardly focussing mainly on that activity. No, the jazz angle isn't to be forgotten or underestimated. Horvitz comes on like a cross between Jan Hammer and Joe Zawinul, with those sophisticated note-choices still rising above the raucous mayhem which this quartet creates. Real jazz credentials, with a smattering of contemporary dance music, not vice versa.

It's essential, having said this, to play this CD loud. Ponga have that quality which very little jazz does of using the sheer ecstatic energy of volume as a part of their sound. Live, they must surely be deafening (if not, get your money back) but this is no loud-is-good nonsense; it's just that music works in different ways at different volumes. Ponga's music, like much other decent fusion, works best when it fills your head with sound. Turn it up, and the drones and 4/4 rhythms turn out to be just the skeleton on which are hung innumerable subtleties.

This is everything which Benny Maupin's "Driving While Black" promised but failed to deliver, a lively and intelligent debate between free-improvised jazz (Ponga use no compositions at all) and certain developments in dance music. To describe it as a sell-out, an attempt to garner a new audience or to make their music more appealing to the jungle crowd is to admit to not having heard the thing. This is not going to get played at Metalheadz. While there are riffs and beats here aplenty, the overall sound is too harsh for the dance music market. Just as Miles Davis hardly cornered the disco market with Agharta, this isn't going to worry L T J Bukem any. It's rude, urban, blaringly impolite. Highly recommended.

Richard Cochrane

Praxis: Transmutation Live

(Douglas: ADC5)

Buckethead (Guitar), Brain (drums), Bill Laswell (bass), DXT (turntables), Q-Bert (turntables), Mixmaster Mike (turntables), Shortkut (turntables), Disk (turntables)

Praxis are basically the house band of Laswell's Axiom label and, however else they might sound, they always sound as if fun is being had. Rooted in funk and rock, but too outré to court mainstream interest, they combine a cut-and-paste aesthetic with strong grooves. If this sounds like a delicious fusion -- and, yes, the word "fusion" was bound to come up sooner or later -- it can be a case of falling between stools as well.

Transmutation Live comes with a mini-essay following the now de rigueur sub-Baudrillard postmodernism which is supposed to lend a radical chic to experimental music but actually just reads like self-serving smartness. As usual, the tub-thumping cybermanifesto swiftly breaks down into a catalogue of Victorian values: witness "without reckless experimentation... we are an empty cipher as a species, devoid of emotion dignity and desire and -- most significantly -- hope." Real post-humanists would dearly love to be able to reduce the human condition to that of empty cipher, and they have found out just how hard that is to accomplish. A comfort it is, then, that one Bill Murphy is responsible for the sleeve notes, not the musicians themselves.

The night's performance is broken down into four quarter-hour pieces, each very much like the others. In each case, a grinding rock riff leads into guitar solos and set pieces by the featured DJs. Each of these latter is different, but all of them are funky, athletic and exciting, using old skool cutting techniques and producing an oddly retro sound. Drummer Brain makes an unintrusive and flexible contribution while, in the absence of Praxis regular Bootsy Collins, Laswell holds down the bottom end with uncharacteristic modesty. Regular DJ DXT adds her/his own comments to the guest spots, perhaps plays a couple of solos (they are not individually credited) and otherwise seems to keep pretty quiet.

Buckethead will be the sticking-point for most listeners. He sounds like an actor playing the part of a heavy metal guitarist, standing there on stage shredding his fretboard as if flanked by enormous quotation marks. His technique, within the narrow remit of 1980s rock guitar, is unquestionable, and he rattles off arpeggios and altered scales as if recording an instructional video, but it's the very obsolete nature of this kind of playing that makes Buckethead's style so odd. He is, of course, a stickler for historical detail, from his pristinely processed sound (all digital distortion, a pinch of delay and a cathedralful of reverb) to the way he structures his solos. The final track even boasts a cheezy rock ballad section, Buckethead rolling back the distortion and playing vibrato-heavy white boy blues reminiscent of Gary Moore trying to be sensitive.

A miracle then that, like all good comic performers, he occasionally transcends his role and produces something more profound. As well as sweep picking and two-handed antics, Buckethead is capable of turning to more abstract methods -- sounding like Sonny Sharrock borrowing Joe Satriani's rig -- or using standard techniques but non-standard note choices to interesting effect, and these more experimental ventures are both more plentiful and better-integrated here than on previous releases. Indeed, his approach could be seen as a valid if bloody-minded attempt to reinvigorate a sound which most of Laswell's fans and their friends would tend to treat like a bad smell.

What is unsatisfying about this record, then, is the fact that none of these individually intriguing propositions really gels with any of the others. You get all the ingredients, but one at a time instead of beaten and baked for an hour. So perhaps fusion is quite the wrong word here. And the thing about collage is that the whole has to be more than the sum of the parts, the parts communicating across their (intact) boundaries. This just isn't happening on this record, not even to the extent that it has sometimes happened for Praxis elsewhere. Buckethead and the guest DJs, in particular, seem to have nothing whatsoever to say to one another, and might as well be playing in different venues.

Richard Cochrane

Eddie Prevost Quartet: Continuum +

([Matchless](#): MRCD07)

Larry Stabbins (saxophones), Vervan Weston (piano), Marcio Mattos (bass), Eddie Prevost (drums).

Eddie Prevost and Vervan Weston: Concert, V

([Matchless](#): MRCD37)

The two latest issues from Prevost's Matchless label are nicely paired; a quartet gig which has acquired a certain amount of status over the years as one of those events you were glad you were at if you were there, or you pretended you were at if you weren't, together with a chance to hear half of that quartet indulge their fondness for the duet format together.

The quartet played a forty-minute continuous set at the Bracknell Jazz Festival in 1983, a set which was released on LP at that time and is re-issued here along with almost as much music again recorded by the same group in a studio nearly two years later. The music is forceful, energetic free jazz, but it only occasionally deploys the kind of assault and battery which people sometimes fear from music like this. Indeed, it has as many moments of tenderness, and of good-natured swinging, as if does of bruising rough-and-tumble.

All four are wonderful free jazz players, but what's nice is how differently they all come at this music. Stabbins, probably the least familiar name on the roster, was a key mover in Working Week and has played sideman to a long list of avant-jazz folk. His playing is boppish and funky, rather reminiscent of Lol Coxhill; he's certainly not, as some detractors have remarked, an Evan Parker clone. Prevost, on the other hand, is best-known for his role in AMM -- indeed, some would say, his role as AMM, since it's possible to find no common musician across all of the AMM catalogue besides this versatile percussionist. As a result, his straighter jazz playing can be undervalued compared with a timbral sensitivity for which he is widely recognised. That's a mistake: Prevost can swing, and here he proves it.

Weston is a great player, a swirling dervish of a pianist with more than a little of Marilyn Crispell about him. He's a more brittle, excitable player than Crispell, however, less interested in pacing himself and more in running amok on the keyboard, making the music surge about as if in a storm at sea while still managing to place the notes, more often than not, in a way which meaningfully interacts with Stabbins's curlicue lines. Marcio Mattos, meanwhile, reminds us of his powerful propulsive force. His real voice may be heard better in more reserved settings than this, but he launches himself into this set with admirable verve.

The studio pieces bring plenty of new scenery. There's a slow ballad with a head which sounds composed, giving Stabbins the chance to smooch up to the mike like Lester Young; a fast, exotic mutation of bebop which has them writhing all over their instruments trying to keep the thing on the rails (they do); a jerky thing called "Pair of Braces", which gets closer to free improv than jazz, a situation in which Stabbins seems ill-at-ease; and a fascinating piece of work which seems caught between a quick, shuffling rhythm and a slow, turgid dirge. Excepting "Pair of Braces", which isn't quite successful, the rest of these earn their place as more than just CD filler; as far as can be devined, they are previously unreleased, and fans of any one of these four musicians will be very pleased to have them. The disc also has a sleeve designed by young tenor lion Simon Picard, and since it's very attractive it rather seems that that very promising reedsman has another talent under his bushel.

"Concert V" isn't a concert recording, but one done in the studio; Prevost is quoted in the sleeve notes as saying it "refers to the verb meaning of the word", although, since there is no verb "to concert", it would appear that he has invented it. No harm in that, as it makes a fine verb: concert (con-'cert), v, to bring together with premeditated determination. Or something. Anyway, it does rather shed a light on the differences between this duo and the quartet which occupies their sister release.

Here there's much more space to work with and, rather than filling it, Prevost and Weston are, more often than not, willing to pepper it with sounds, sprinkling them none-too-liberally around the music. That's not to say this is all quiet stuff, but tracks like "Symphony of Surfaces" which work up to a spiralling complexity which baffles the ear nevertheless seem to emerge from silence, and sit on top of it like a thin layer. Perhaps that's because Weston favours the upper octaves of his piano so strongly; the music seems to have great gaping holes in it, and it's all the better for that.

This is a record which is obviously made with an intense degree of concentration. Although the quartet disc is also very focussed, it has a sort of knockabout sense of enjoyment which these duets seem to have abandoned in favour of something slightly more severe. Maybe it's a part of Prevost's ideas about malleability -- in terms of musicians with over-arching theories, Prevost is the anti-Fripp incarnate -- or maybe not, but the differences between these two discs aren't differences in quality so much as in attitude, ambiance and approach. They require different approaches from the listener, too, and they reward them richly.

Matchless recordings can be ordered from 2 Shetlock's Cottages, Matching Tye, Nr Harlow, Essex, CM17 0QR United Kingdom. A catalogue and ordering details are also available from the same address. It's always advisable to send return postage when contacting smaller labels from another country.

The Remote Viewers: Obliques before Pale Skin

([Leo Lab](#): CD063)

Adrian Northover (saxophones, theremin), Louise Petts (saxophones, voice, synth, theremin), David Petts (saxophones, synth, theremin)

The Poison Cabinet: Dark Embrace

([The General Ear](#): GE4)

Louise Petts (voice, electronics), David Petts (tenor sax, electronics)

The Petts are one of London's best-kept secrets. They gig rarely, as their music crosses categories of new composition, rock, jazz and free improv, although it isn't really any of those things, and the electronics they use can make playing tiny club nights a headache. Yet what they do is perfectly unique, and they continue to stubbornly plough their furrow despite the obvious difficulties it presents.

With fellow saxophonist Northover, they form The Remote Viewers, for whom this is the second release on Leo (you can read about their first [here](#)). A very assured piece of work it is too, with covers of songs by Van Heusen, Tiomkin and Madonna sitting alongside David Petts's trademark compositions. These latter are hard to get at first; they seem deliberately ugly, atavistically complicated and lumpy at the same time. But that, in a way, is what he's after, a music which is built on a severe and distinctly un-cuddly framework.

You only have to see a photograph of them, really; they're one of the few British avant garde bands who have a "look". For them it's a sort of thirties style, all dark suits and drapery, as if T S Eliot's bank clerks worked on high modernist sculpture and read Wittgenstein at the weekend. The music has a strong modernist feel, but that's just a part of what they do. They also cover songs by Madonna, for example, not in an ironic, po-mo sort of way but just because they like the chord changes. There's a real sense of enjoyment in this sometimes austere, sometimes noisy but always very disciplined music.

When Northover isn't around, Petts and Petts still make music, this time under the rubric of The Poison Cabinet, and they release about one cassette a year on the General Ear label. As David Petts composes all the music for both groups, and Louise Petts writes all the words, there are plenty of similarities here, but there are a surprising amount of differences, too. Northover makes up a sax trio in The Remote Viewers, which gives them the opportunity to explore thick, reedy contrapuntal textures. With the Poison Cabinet, there's more emphasis on the electronics and on songwriting. Their release is, as a result, far more accessible to those coming from a rock background. It's also a good place to hear David Petts's wonderful and much-underrated tenor playing in a more exposed setting, which is always good. This, their fourth cassette, is the best so far; the electronics sound more assured, and the recording quality is, considering the medium, impeccable.

Both releases have moments of sheer beauty as well as the angular compositions for which David Petts is known (and ought to be better-known; this writer likes to think of someone doing a jazz album of Petts tunes, but they're tricky, for sure). "Creatures of Distance" is a lovely piece composed of dissonant, drifting synth chords with saxophones thickening the texture, moving gradually into simultaneous soloing of the sort that the trio do extremely well. Although hard to describe, the music these people make is easy to recommend. Check it out if you haven't already done so.

Richard Cochrane

Radioactive Sparrow: We're Breaking Through

([Unsound Automatic](#) : UACD004)

Bill Bargefoot, Tony Gage, Richard Bowers, Chris Hartford (guitars, vocals, keyboards etc)

Radioactive Sparrow: Live and Let Off

([Unsound Automatic](#) : UACD005)

Bill Bargefoot, Tony Gage, Richard Bowers (guitars, vocals, keyboards, drum machines etc)

Oh, this is extremely risky stuff. Where to start? On the face of it, Radioactive Sparrow are a really, really terrible mixture of 60s hippy rock, punk and the most incompetent sixth-form band you ever encountered. Their songs mostly sound like casual mum's-lounge jams between beginner musicians who have no intention of actually playing any proper songs. Nobody seems to practice their instruments much, or to care that the sounds they make are mostly composed of cock-ups.

If the band members individually seem to have no regard whatever for technique or conventional musicianship of any kind, the group as a whole has the consistency of a watery cake mix. Sticky and unweildy, nothing seems able to lift them into anything resembling a groove. Instead, everybody plays deliberately out-of-time and out-of-tune; "Let's dance to the rhythm of the music", they sing, rather ambitiously as a drum machine hammers out sixteenth-notes on the bass drum and two detuned guitars vaguely noodle around. Band members can often be heard holding conversations in the background; the songs are sometimes prefaced by the band tuning up or trying to work out the riff, and end in derailments.

The reference points here are groups like The Doors, Beefheart's Magic Band, the dregs of UK punk and even the Velvet Underground. However, none of these bands' redeeming features is present. This is particularly true of the lyrics, which seem to be improvised (though one suspects they're not) in a deliberate parody of Jim Morrison's rubbish but pompous orations. They sound exactly like the lyrics you wrote for your school rock band but never showed them, because you realised how crap they were. They're sub-sixth-form reject lyrics, and some of them are very funny indeed. Their singer cannot sing at all, although he certainly can burp.

Does it come off? Who can say? It's a kind of arch, high-concept music so utterly drenched in cynicism as to make the Sex Pistols sound like Chris Rea. Yet behind the nihilism -- anything goes, so who cares what we play any more? -- there's also a celebration of amateur music-making. Perhaps not such a potent celebration as Eugene Chadbourne's, say, but a characteristically British, even characteristically Welsh, one. These records were made under drizzly grey skies by the socially and musically stunted. Occasionally -- very, very occasionally -- something of conventionally musical value does shine through, but those bits are probably mistakes.

Richard Cochrane

The Remote Viewers: Low Shapes in Dark Heat

([Leo Lab](#): CD049)

Adrian Northover (soprano sax, alto sax), Louise Petts (alto sax, voice, synthesiser), David Petts (tenor sax, synthesiser)

The sax section from New York art-rock-punk-jazz-call-it-what-you-like group B Shops for the Poor has spawned an offshoot, which essentially sounds much like the B Shops themselves. They favour blocks of sound, often avoiding vibrato and other markers of "jazz" expressivity in favour of squalls of noise, synth textures and Louise Petts' voice.

There are only a couple of vocal tracks here, including a lovely, utterly stoned version of Sun Ra's "Astro Black". Petts has a voice which is unaffected and rather anonymous, which is a compliment in this setting where personalities tend to be subsumed to the ensemble sound. The synthesisers use warm, analogue-style patches redolent of 70s space fusion, but the crisp horn sections could only really be contemporary, bringing polytonal blocks of sound into collision in a manner reminiscent of late Stravinsky. The first track title, indeed, gives a hint of their intention. "What the Building wants to Be" is, presumably, pure architectural structure, unfettered by the demands of materials, function and safety regulations. This feels like a good indication of what many of these tracks are trying to achieve: a kind of formal abstraction which is very different from what anyone might call "jazz".

There are solos here -- Adrian Northover, for instance, has a very likeable habit of jabbing at his notes like a chicken pecking gravel -- but they are subsumed to the needs of the music, and everyone seems to agree that the compositions come first. The result is sour and lumpy, but not as unpalatable as one might suspect, and any awkwardness which these strangely angular pieces might have had is brushed aside by the sheer quality of the performances.

Richard Cochrane

The Remote Viewers: Persuasive With Aliens

([Leo Lab](#): CD067)

Adrian Northover (soprano sax), Louise Petts (alto sax, electronics, voice), David Petts (tenor sax, electronics)

The Petts have been doing this sort of thing in the company of Adrian Northover for some years now. For those who aren't familiar with their music, it's a uniquely Expressionist mix of rock and avant gardism, a chilly blend of electronics, gargantuan saxophone choirs and Louise Petts's sprechgesang.

In one sense, this has all the ingredients of past releases: the repeating, densely-textured horn trio showpieces, the sequencer-assisted song arrangements, the surrealist lyrics, even the unlikely cover versions (Bowie and Portishead this time, the latter a clumsy error of judgement). But, as with previous releases, there is a definite sense of progression here.

David Petts's use of synthesisers, in particular, becomes ever more sophisticated. The shimmering beeps which punctuate "The Destruction of Elegance" capture the estrangement of much Modernist art -- the artwork as glimpse onto an alien landscape, complete with theremins -- while managing a self-aware sense of the historicity of such a view.

This group has always been an impressive saxophone trio, and these sections, with their dissonant, intervallic harmonies sounding like serialist fanfares, remain a major feature, but they're much better-integrated with the electronics than previously.

This is a disc which the Remote Viewers can be really proud of. Although some may feel they continue to plough the same furrow, it represents a vision of music shared by almost nobody: this is music which has no place among the improv snobs, the jazz snobs, the rock snobs or -- where these days it might, oddly, be most at home-- the electronica anoraks. For those who enjoy thee uncategorisable, the music of the Petts will always be a pleasure all the sweeter for the hard discovering of it. If you know none of their output, start with this, a truly mature statement of an aesthetic steeped in 20th century Europe but with an eye on the 21st..

Richard Cochrane

Remote Viewers: Stranded Depots

([Leo Lab](#): CD076)

[David Petts](#) (tenor sax, keyboards), Louise Petts (voice, alto sax, theremin), Adrian Northover (saxophones)

This is a trio which just gets better with every release. David and Louise Petts are composer/saxophonists who work virtually exclusively together, on their own compositions, releasing material on Leo Records. This apparent lack of interest in doing the rounds of the avant garde "scene" trying to scrape together gigs and play with anyone who's around is refreshing and pleasing; the results are extremely distinctive.

Regular readers will know what they do; music which is simultaneously austere and melodramatic, something like Nosferatu; the kind of music Adorno might of liked, if he hadn't been so hung up on orchestras and the whole tuxedo'd world of Western "culture". Louise Petts's voice is cool and clearly enunciated, as if she were singing Brecht, and the words are obscure socio-political allegories, deliberately cryptic and full of figures in vast wildernesses and meditations on abstract patterns of light in monochrome rooms.

This said, it might sound incongruous that they usually choose to do a couple of unexpected cover versions. Not always successfully, but always with utter avoidance of kitsch. Here it's "Goodbye" by Gordon Jenkins and a tiny sketch by Satie, so less controversial than some of their previous choices. Otherwise, their work falls into two camps: instrumentals, which are generally sax trio-driven but these days often underpinned with electronics, and songs, which are generally the reverse.

As a saxophone trio the Viewers are really something else. The music they play is unique, often dense and rhythmic with the same perversity of logic one finds in some of the great jazz composers, performed impeccably by the three. As a composer and arranger, David Petts creates songs which are radically different in texture -- far more open, with thin, high notes and dislocated drum machine sequences which make references these days to the most undanceable forms of ambient drum 'n' bass.

The Remote Viewers -- along with their larger version, B Shops for the Poor, and the Petts' duo The Poison Cabinet -- are a fascinating musical entity which simply refuses to be anything but itself. Too uncompromising to fit neatly into categories, they continue doing what they like, in the hope that people will get it. The getting thereof is well worth the effort.

Richard Cochrane

Deplete Coitus

(order from web site)

[Taylor Carrasco](#) (compositions)

Repeat: Temporary Contemporary

([For4ears](#): CD1032)

[Toshimaru Nakamura](#) (no-input mixing board, sampling), [Jason Kahn](#) (percussion, sampling)

Two releases which share a lot of common ground while producing some really rather distinctive results. Although Carrasco seems to be coming from the ambient-industrial-techno end of things, whereas Toshimaru and Kahn are free improvisors, both end up making grungy, murky electronica which uses repetition without being bound to it.

The Deplete Coitus release is a twenty-minute EP with a basically synth-driven texture. The pieces evolve loops, or at least seem to; in fact, each repetitive unit tends to mutate in odd ways, or to rotate a few times only to be swamped by an analogue fog. The first track is especially tricky in this respect, constantly disappointing your expectations by exceeding them with every imaginative twist. It's reminiscent of some of the more ambient Techno Animal tracks, something you can tap your foot to but which is constantly catching you out.

Carrasco's world is heavily populated by squelches, clanks and bands of static, but there's room for humour, too. A very amusing -- and rather poignant -- faux cameo from Stephen Hawking appears on "Andantino loi", only to be followed by a witty re-working of something which sounds like a soundtrack to an early-'80s computer game. This reference -- plus the disturbingly pornographic Japanese anime visuals -- links Deplete Coitus to the electronica tradition from which it seems so distant. Well worth picking up in the absence of a full-length release, which would surely be a success, as these twenty minutes seem to disappear very quickly.

Repeat, as their name suggests, have a much more mechanical feel -- oddly, because of course they have an acoustic component which Carrasco avoids. Their sound is repetitive in that motorik manner which sounds, initially, like objects bumping along on a conveyor belt until one's ear becomes accustomed to it (one thing which helps is playing it very loud).

Kahn samples his metals and drums on quite short loops, allowing them to build into big, rhythmic textures, while Toshimaru works with bleeps, sine waves and what sound like electrical, rather than electronic, phenomena. Often their approach is to build things on top of one another so that previous ideas tend to just get quieter in the mix rather than being transformed.

The sensation is rather like walking through a factory, the sounds of some machines fading as you walk away from them and towards others (that tended to be Techno Animal's approach, too, for those who love to make connections). As a result, these pieces can be hypnotic and static, and the fact that their sounds tend not to be terribly abrasive reinforces this effect. Kahn's metal objects, for example, often sound as if they're being coaxed with a soft beater rather than torn in half, as such things sometimes do. The standout track is number 5 (they're untitled), a rather minimal piece relying on a simple, repeated figure in a storm of electrical glitching.

Two very different CDs, then, with some odd similarities. Deplete Coitus works in a very linear fashion; what Temporary Contemporary generally let you hear is the construction of the end result, a great multi-layered monster of a sound slowly built up section by section. The latter technique is rather crude and over-used, but it's effective here just because of the lapidary quality of the music. Electronics are always going to have to confront the issue of repetition, which is so deeply entrenched in the tradition of electronic music; these are two discs which find interesting but very different solutions to the problem.

[Richard Cochrane](#)

Re-sound

(Monash: no number)

Compositions by John Cage, Brendan Colbert, Thomas Reiner, Ken Murray, Harvey Solberger and Paul Moutatlet.

Re-sound are an Australian ensemble who here present eight chamber works, by members of the group and others. The sound-world is very contemporary, with all of the variations which that implies.

Musical director [Thomas Reiner](#), for example, comes on like an updated Hindemith in his almost-tuneful, almost-tonal "Septet". This is an ensemble which seems to love the multi-layered complications which Reiner brings into play here; reaching for another comparison, there's something of Elliot Carter in this dancing, fiendishly contrapuntal music. It's quite a contrast to Reiner's other work on this programme, a clarinet solo which deals with long notes and pauses, taking an interestingly un-melodic approach to a naturally melodic format. Ken Murray, meanwhile, takes the conventionally percussive approach to solo classical guitar in a piece he performs himself; its mixture of snapping bass notes and rather consonant arpeggios is nice enough, but the four and a half minutes he gives it is about the limit for this kind of thing.

Brendan Colbert is a composer who has even closer links with New Complexity than Reiner's; his "Agite" adds another very demanding and complicated-sounding piece to the solo flute repertoire. It's breezy and joyously mercurial, and Melanie Chilianis carries it off with the flair it needs, proving that this style of music need not be drily "difficult" or "challenging" for the listener.

Colbert's trio "Spiel" also appears, and it's a more austere affair, but full of intricacies and with so much going on at once that you immediately want to go back and listen again. Harvey Solberger's "Sunflowers", a duet for flute and vibraphone, has a similar ambiance but a warmer overall tone; it feels like a more lightweight piece, but that makes it a good contrast with "Spiel".

Paul Moutatlet's "Chamber Work #2" was the only piece here which this writer found difficult to engage with; its rather formal feel distances it from much of the other material on the disk, and its similarity to other music written ten years before does it no special favours. It must be fun to play, but it's pretty indifferent listening; neither good nor bad, but merely indifferent. That can't be said for the very late Cage composition "Seven", which kicks off the CD in a veil of long notes out of which isolated sounds appear only to vanish again. It's unlike anything else on this collection, and starting with a twenty-minute piece of such unassuming loveliness may have seemed a foolhardy move, but it works.

This is a very varied collection of new music, mostly new music from Australia, something which non-Australians rarely get to hear about. All of it is well-performed, often with a vigor which enlivens scores which might otherwise have fallen flat. Although there's nothing ground-breaking here, there's no special reason why there ought to be, and the compositions, most of them from the 1990s, are working with a vocabulary which is well-established and, many would say, time-tested, too.

Richard Cochrane

Aki Takase: Le Cahier du Bal

([Leo](#): CDLR319)

Aki Takase (piano)

Howard Riley Trio: Overground

([Emanem](#): 4054)

Howard Riley (piano), Barry Guy (bass), Tony Oxley (percussion, electronics)

Pandelis Karayorgis Trio: Blood Ballad

([Leo](#): CDLR325)

Pandelis Karayorgis (piano), Nate McBride (bass), Randy Peterson (drums)

Christine Wodrascka & Ramon Lopez: Aux Portes du Matin

([Leo](#): CDLR318)

Christine Wodrascka (piano), Ramon Lopez (drums)

T

akase, Karayorgis and Wodrascka are all firm-handed pianists who take jazz seriously. The first two owe something to Monk -- who doesn't? -- but their languages are quite different despite some superficial similarities; Wodrascka is more distant from the jazz tradition, but this is still very much jazz music rather than something else. Riley is, of course, an established player with an international reputation; while comparisons with the younger players are unfair, there's clearly some common ground here among them all.

Takase is all over the keyboard; she has more Cecil Taylor in her playing than first appears. There are none of the great galloping chromatic runs which pianists employ so liberally these days, however, and it's the older man's sense of jazz harmony which seems to have made an impact on Takase.

The fifteen improvisations here are freewheeling and rather wild for the most part, but the complete confidence of touch which powers them along is wedded to a cunning thematic approach to developing material and one never feels that the music is slipping away from her.

There's a lot of functional harmony here, and much more exposed than you'd usually find in Taylor's playing. "Tango de Anzu", an exquisite exercise in dramatic staccato, even moves through a succession of tonal centres. But it's never reduced to changes or lazy cadences; Takase does a continuous high-wire act and never falls into the safety net. This is hugely impressive stuff, and we had better hear more from Takase in the future; she must have a mind like a bacon-slicer to play such intelligent, structured music on the fly. Unconditionally recommended.

Pandelis Karayorgis is a no less smart player. His clever uses of dissonance impressed in [Heart and Sack](#) and continue to do so here. Inspired by the Strayhorn/Ellington book, and covering a Coltrane tune, he's in even more mainstream jazz territory here than he was on his previous release, and this is music which many who find most of Leo's catalogue a little intimidating will be able to get along with grandly.

That's certainly not to say it's a lightweight set, however. Karayorgis is a pianist not to be underestimated; his fractured, Monk-like logic is absolutely right and the uneasy conjunction of rather sentimental hard bop with jagged angles is constantly arresting. He seems to think his way through each solo, making weird but valid deductions from the basic harmonic scheme. Indeed, the extent of such a scheme or the degree of composition is not clear, because the trio's playing is sure-footed but oblique throughout.

As for McBride and Peterson, they mainly hold back and provide support for the pianist -- a welcome improvement over the loud "Heart and Sack" set, which sounds ragged by comparison. Both are consummately tasteful, and although their contributions are essential they're appropriately understated. The focus here is on Karayorgis, and anyone who enjoys jazz piano would be wise to hear what he has to say.

Christine Wodrascka is far more "abstract" than Takase or Karayorgis; she's also the youngest and least well-known. Like Takase, her modus operandi is thematic development, but here the themes are deceptively simple blocks of sound, and she's as interested in their rhythmic as harmonic characteristics.

her duet with Lopez is dynamic and chromatic, impetuous and, in one sense anyway, not terribly subtle. But Wodrascka's music isn't about subtlety, or not really anyway, and her rhythmic dynamism is what keeps you listening to these very involving performances. She's at her best when tackling her rugged lumps of material -- big dissonant chords which tremble and hammer under her fingers -- rather than quietly ruminating on the strings (as she does on one piece) or preparing the instrument. This latter is quite a mess, although an undoubtedly enjoyable one as objects ping off the strings and bounce around. That seems to be a big part of

her aesthetic, and one imagines that Lopez, who likes this sort of thing, is having a ball.

Still, there's a definite jazziness at the heart of this music. Lopez, although far from a traditional free bop man, plays with a lazy swing for a gopod portion of this music, something over which both his and his partner's big, dramatic gestures can sit. The pair work together beautifully, and although the music here is somewhat mixed the high points are very, very impressive.

British veteran Howard Riley has things in common with all of these players -- Takase's thematic cunning, Karayorgis's obliquity, Wodrascka's thunder -- but, of course, in a rather different package. Riley is, unlike any of these three, entirely divorced from functional harmony, and his approach to rhythm is, as the cliché has it, angular. Actually, the cliché has something to recommend it; Riley really does sound as if he's navigating absurdly frequent hairpin bends at the keyboard, and hardly has he begun to state an idea, it seems, then he's driven it with what appears to be wild abandon in the opposite direction.

It's a pleasure to hear Riley in good company, and we're fortunate that his taste in musicians has always been pretty good. Rarely have such heights as these been obtained, however; the trio with Oxley and Guy sounds like it's going to be pure perfection, and it is. The bassist is infinitely flexible, and here his arco sings, growls, grizzles, punctuates and percusses, always in synch with Riley and often pushing him, with a split-second manoeuvre, into one of those handbrake-turns which so characterise this music. The bassist in a piano trio can sometimes feel like a spare wheel, but never here; Guy is proactive, Riley is constantly interested, and both listen with enviable acuity.

Oxley's musicianship is, like that of the other two, legendary. He's just the sort of thing Riley needs, a player, like Guy, which is unintimidated and full of ideas. His main mode is a very busy rush of sound, but within that is a forest of detail. He has plenty more percussive techniques than this, of course, but the music here being often blustering and highly energetic, this approach is often in evidence.

Oxley also uses electronics here to augment the trio sound. Sometimes this approach can be pretty nasty, as irrelevant bleeps and squarks leap out of an otherwise acoustic setting. Oxley, however, is cleverer than this, and the sounds he employs are close to the sounds of the trio, so that even a close listen can have you mystified as to which instrument you're hearing, especially as all three use amplification and stomp-box effects from time to time. There's absolutely nothing intrusive about any of this, and the Oxley-Riley duet "Pages", where the electronics are at their most obvious, sounds remarkably like the trio usually does, with the extended techniques which are widely in evidence augmented by electronics. The piece, and the remainder of the music here, is utterly absorbing and ravishingly lovely. Recommended without hesitation.

Richard Cochrane

Gino Robair: Buddy Systems

(Meniscus: 003)

Gino Robair (percussion), Dave Barrett (reeds), Myles Boisen (guitars, CD player), John Butcher (sax), Carla Kihlstedt (violin), Tim Perkis (electronics), Dan Plonsey (clarinet), LaDonna Smith (strings, voice), Matthew Sperry (bass), Oluyemi Thomas (reeds, percussion), Otomo Yoshihide (turntables, CD players)

John Butcher: Music on Seven Occasions

(Meniscus: 004)

John Butcher (sax), Gino Robair (percussion), Alexander Frangenheim (bass), Vervan Weston (piano), Thomas Lehn (synthesiser), John Corbett (guitar), Jeb Bishop (trombone), Terri Kapsalis (violin), Fred Lonberg-Holm (cello), Michael Zerang (percussion, tubaphone)

F Vattel Cherry: For Those Who Heal

(Maraschino Music: No number)

F Vattel Cherry (bass), John Dierker (bass clarinet), Peter Hickey (bass), Blaise Siwula (alto sax), John Voigt (bass), Ras Chris (guitar, harmonica, bamboo fute, percussion)

Albums which compile duets in varied groupings are so often unlistenable; of the good tracks, one isn't enough, and the less good ones sound as if they're there just to make up numbers. One wonders why each grouping seems to have been unable to generate enough music for a proper record, or feels one is being fed scraps from the table. The result can be a pointlessly jarring, ill-conceived release of music in the wrong format (MP3, perhaps, would be better)

The quality of the music on Gino Robair's dreadfully-entitled contribution to this dubious genre is good enough to lift it beyond the reach of these reservations, however. Dan Plonsey tears it up; Kihlstedt and Sperry come over all Arvo Part-like; Tim Perkis comes from another planet, and plays with quicksilver inventiveness. Each and every one of the fourteen tracks is a little gem. They're not too little, either (another source of potential irritation): at up to nine minutes, each one is weighty enough to gather its own momentum.

Still, though, the feeling that these sorts of records are designed as documents rather than as listening experiences persists. Overall, they can sound a bit like a singles collection, or compilation tapes. Nevertheless, this one is especially good to dip into and of particular interest to those not so familiar with the musicians featured.

Robair's disk includes a superb trio featuring John Butcher and, with pleasing symmetry, Butcher's own collection of duos with varying partners includes two with Robair. This disc, however, is organised rather differently. For a start, there are four brief but still valuable segments of Butcher solo, something he has made very much his own. Secondly, the nine different partnerships are grouped together, and the selection is clearly biased in favour of Weston and Zerang (three tracks each), then Robair (two tracks); the rest appear once only.

Presumably this is an attempt to overcome the bittiness inherent in the format. Butcher's voice is far stronger and more distinctive than Robair's, and so the battle is half won anyway because of the continuity this gives the tracks. Further, his aesthetic is sufficiently strong that the music on all of these pieces sounds, as it were, of a piece, which helps enormously. As with Robair's disc, the selection of partners is impeccable; to risk repetition, however, one yearns to hear more of each grouping, and by the time a particular partnership's working methods begin to make sense, their section is over. As with Robair's disc, the material here is extremely good and very valuable stuff to have access to, but one hopes that album-length releases from some of these sessions will become available in time.

Vattel Cherry takes a rather different and ultimately more successful approach to the format on "For Those Who Heal". Instead of wide-ranging instrumentations, he's gone for reeds-plus-bass, bass-plus-bass and bass solo. There are only eight tracks, one of which (the one with Hickey) is twenty minutes long, so there's plenty of time and space to make the music matter. All five partners are strong players in the contemporary free jazz style; Dierker a sort of melodic, laid-back Charles Gayle, Siwula weaving a flowing ballad which is pure New York, Voigt (probably the best-known name here) dishing up electrified attitude, Hickey a more angular partner who challenges Cherry with happy results.

Cherry himself is a funky player, enjoying the snap and pop of the strings against the fingerboard as much as the more conventional lines and walks of this music. His playing always seems to have a strutting, almost swaggering gait about it, cocky but warm too, perfect for a gospelly, sometimes raucous but above all blues-

based jazz style. The duet with Hickey is something of a step outside this territory, but it's to his credit that they stick at it and create some dramatic, even startling music as a result.

The music on all three of these records is truly excellent. This writer would dearly love to hear albums by *any* of the featured duets. Your tolerance for hearing bits and pieces stitched together into an album, however, will probably be a matter of personal taste and patience. Of the lot, Cherry's has by far the most continuity. Perhaps we ought to be more tolerant of discontinuity, but most listening situations will not favour the bits-and-pieces approach. All three recommended with that reservation.

Richard Cochrane

Herb Robertson: Music for Long Attention Spans

([Leo](#): CDLR315)

Herb Robertson (trumpet, little instruments), Steve Swell (trombone), Bob Hovey (trombone, percussion, voice), Hans Tammen (guitar), Chris Lough (bass), Tom Sayek (drums)

Dominic Duval: Asylem

([Leo](#): CDLR316)

Dominic Duval (bass, electronics), Herb Robertson (trumpet, little instruments), Bob Hovey (trombone, turntable, voice), Jay Rosen (percussion)

Trumpeter Herb Robertson was a Berklee-trained fusioner for much of the seventies. He discovered free jazz and the classical music of his century only later, but it is, as these things often are, now entered in his biog as his Damascus Road. For all the unpromising things this promises, however, Robertson is a son of Freddie Hubbard and Kenny Wheeler, a mercurial trumpeter with roots in hard bop reaching for the skies of the avant garde.

As such, "Music for Long Attention Spans" contains more composition than most of the free jazz discs mentioned in these pages, although it must still account for less than 1 per cent of the music as heard. The compositions are lumpy and instantly appealing, even catchy, and they're presented in a way reminiscent of the Art Ensemble of Chicago, with a preference for atmosphere and exuberance over tight ensemble playing. This makes them a real pleasure to hear when they emerge, as they do from time to time, from the group interplay with a naturalness which is harder to achieve than it sounds.

Apart from the genuine versatility of his cohorts, Robertson offers considerable variety himself. As well as a virtuoso and uniquely personal trumpet style, he plays shambolic but fun melodica, keening whistles which add a touch of the ethno-forgery of much earlier free jazz projects and toys as well as ranting extraordinarily through a poem on the opening track, a funny and musically effective performance in itself. His style is not very showy, especially in this brass-heavy setting, but when he gets solo space his charms are undeniable. What's more, when he's working with the group he's proactive, even interventionist, which is something quite rare in American jazz, where horning in on another player's solo is so often grounds for hissy-fits in the dressing room.

The triple-brass frontline here is dynamic and at times challenging for all concerned, but all three keep their heads straight and interact with clarity. As for the rhythm section, Tammen's extraordinary electric guitar is a loose cannon firing acid-coated missiles all over the deck, while Lough and Sayek pump out a relentless, but extremely varied, tidal pulse. This is a jazz band of splendid talents, and this record must be one of the most exciting in the Leo catalogue of those which fall firmly under that generic rubric. Full of unexpected moments, it is genuinely enthralling.

The album with Duval is a very different affair. Despite titles like "The Nightmare" and (oh dear) "Rectal Parasites", it's mostly a more relaxed joint, showcasing seven compositions by Bob Hovey (four co-written by Duval). Rosen is his characteristically twitchy but effective self, but Duval's bass is in sexy, slinky mode for much of this set, and the overall feel is rather laid-back in comparison with the above disc.

That's not to say the music is trivial, or even any less serious. Hovey's turntablism may not be particularly effective -- speed it up! slow it down! spin it backwards! -- but his compositions have a stateliness which has all kinds of pleasing resonances in the history of jazz. Robertson and Duval work beautifully together, and the aforementioned "Rectal Parasites" is a great example, with Duval sliding great, deep notes around the fingerboard in between his dramatic gestures while Robertson skywrites high above him. "Shadow 2", meanwhile has a clever hocket arrangement of a bluesy theme which reminded this writer of Henry Threadgill, no faint praise in the composition stakes.

Rosen is a treasure, but his understanding of swing doesn't always gel with Robertson's more traditional version. This isn't an ageist thing; Rosen comes from different traditions, and although he has some jazz in his playing he didn't grow up listening and playing within that genre as intently as the trumpeter did. As a result, things can sometimes do slightly askew, rhythmically speaking, but at other moments the tension really fires both players to stretch in different directions.

This is a more easy-going set for the listener, but it may have been a more challenging one for the players. While the first disc is an unqualified hit, this is trickier to pin down. The emergence of Robertson on this side of the Atlantic is to be welcomed; the first disc listed here is the one to discover him with, but the second is interesting and shouldn't be dismissed.

Bill Cole: The Untempered Ensemble, Duets & Solos Vol 1

([Boxholder](#): BXH001)

Bill Cole (reeds), Cooper-More (horizontal hoe-handle harp, diddley bow), Warren Smith (percussion), William Parker (bass, one track only)

Rohstoff: Fullmoonimprovisations 1999/2000 Tryllehaven

([Intuitive](#): IRCD002)

Felix Becker, Ivan Vincze, Carl Bergstrom-Nielsen, Laszlo Bela Kovacs, Patricia Roncayolo, Niseema Munk-Madsen, Daniel Briegleb, Janos Veto Lavman, Kaszon Kovacz, Mikkel Hornnes, Ervin Janos Lazar, Thomas Bredsdorff, Ildiko Ungvary (instrumentation not specified)

There is a particular approach to improvisation which can seem slightly strange when you first encounter it, although it's been around in free improv at least since the days of the AACM, and so probably since free improv existed at all. This approach finds a commonality with field recordings of "exotic" musics rather than with the studio, and seeks, one way or another, to embrace that commonality in a non-contradictory way.

Rohstoff represent one way of doing this. Most of their CD was recorded outside, in quite noisy environments and without sophisticated equipment. Although some are recognisable and familiar, most of the instruments sound either exotic or home-made. Vocal outbursts are common, too, and what with the group's tendency towards occasional pulsed rhythms and melodic-harmonic "riffs" one is rather strongly reminded of the music of the poorest and most isolated parts of West Africa. There is a sense that this music is supposed to be part of an environment both natural and, as it turns out, technological, as a railway station tannoy locates this apparently rural music in an urban setting, indeed in one of Europe's cultural centres.

This, then, is a long way from mere ethno-forgery or any attempt to reach for some authentic, "natural" way of making music. This is music which is often funny and sometimes perverse -- take the completely incongruous eleventh track, a skewed acid jazz pastiche which bears no relation to anything else on the disk, or its successor: "put you CD player on repeat", says the liner, but the effect is just that you hear the same, perfectly complete piece over and over again. Bizarrely compelling, these recordings dig down into something conceptually very deep in the free improv tradition, but they're musically lively enough to be much more than just ideas. The Copenhagen scene is a rich one, and the arrival of new label Intuitive to document it is most welcome.

Bill Cole is also working in an area clearly influenced by field recordings, although it's hard to imagine a more different record from Rohstoff's. Cole is a composer whose music allows plenty of space for improvisation; he is also an expert performer on a range of double-reed instruments, flutes and other things you blow into, and his playing and compositional styles clearly indicate a long and profound study of middle-Eastern and North African musics.

Here we find him solo (on Western flute and then on the Middle-Eastern Shenai) and in duet with Cooper-Moore, Smith and Parker. Cooper-Moore's self-made African instruments are a revelation; the harp has a piercingly beautiful, light sound, while the diddley-bow sounds like an infinitely flexible bass guitar, played slap-style, of course. The former is paired with Cole on didgeridoo, while for the second he switches again to shenai. In effect, this means that they swap accompanying duties between the two tracks, and the results are extremely lovely. Cole's shenai is dazzlingly felicitous, something like Braxton but with far fewer roots in jazz

The same pattern holds for duets with Smith. In the first, Cole's Tibetan trumpet provides a weird, meandering undercurrent for Smith's spacious gong solo; Cole switches back to shenai and Smith to the drum kit for their second pieces, a melodic workout which free jazz fans will find perfectly recognisable.

There's only one duet with Parker (a second one will appear on Volume 2, out later this year), but it's a treat. They play the melody with wonderful flexibility, and the arco bass blends perfectly with the Chinese piri, leading to an often frantically inventive jam. Overall, the solos are lovely, but just a bit less edgy and exciting than the duets, as if Cole benefits strongly from the interaction.

Cole is clearly a superb player, and is making a kind of music which tends to be looked down on as a novelty act. It may well be hard to categorise, but it's hugely rewarding to listen to. Recommended.

Richard Cochrane

Rottor: The First Full Turn

([Emanem](#): 4026)

Paul Rutherford (trombone, voice), Julie Tippet (voice, thumb piano), Keith Tippet (piano, bells, maracas), Paul Rogers (bass)

This is, as the name suggests, a document of the first "official" performance by Rottor, as opposed to Rotor, the same group without Julie Tippet. An added bonus -- beyond the call of duty, what with track one being over fifty minutes long -- is a solo turn by Rutherford from a couple of months earlier.

For anyone who is expecting something like what the Tippetts do in duet, this might come as a bit of a shock. Here, you get none of the resounding great rhythmic structures they seem to like to much, the pianist's resolutely un-jazzy ostinati underpinning ad lib melodic lines by his wife. Instead, this finds both musicians working in more volatile surroundings, quickly moving from idea to idea and allowing the flow of the music to carry them. Now and again, a stentorian quick-march from the prepared piano coaxes the vocals into those arching, delicate melodies, but nothing hangs around for long in this group; blink and, as ever, it's gone.

It's hardly surprising that Rutherford seems to have been the one who brought up the idea of expanding the group to include the vocalist on a permanent basis (she'd made up the trio on one occasion when Rogers was indisposed). The two of them communicate with wonderful clarity, although of course there's no question of parroting one another's ideas. One of the most important singers around, and one of the most innovative trombonists, they both have strong identities and yet they find considerable common ground here. When the sparks fly, it's exciting music indeed.

It's a continuous performance, but the piece does, like many improvisations of this length, break down into sections, which is a relief for the listener but which shouldn't come as a surprise. All four are veteran improvisors, and at least two of them have had the opportunity to show they can manage a long stretch of time in a solo setting before now. Paul Rogers, however, should get special mention here, as his muscular bass (captured in all its woody splendour here) rolls and cajoles the music forwards. It's hard for bass players to really make a lasting mark in this music, and Rogers doesn't have a bag full of gimmicks to help him along, but he's a totally committed player and it's a shame he's not heard more often.

Rutherford's solo set is nicely gimmick-free, too. He has nothing to prove any more and, unlike so many young turks, he matured and found he had something to say instead. "Another Solo Turn" is a twelve-minute rumination on melodic possibilities, the difficulty of creating a line which feels like a line but isn't hackneyed. As a result, it's completely in tune with what precedes it. With carefully-crafted steps, Rutherford constructs surprising melody after surprising melody. Making no small nod to the military tradition, he wraps up an hour and a bit of passionate, linear improvisation.

Richard Cochrane

Russell/Altena/Day: The Fairly Young Bean

([Emanem](#): 4036)

John Russell (guitar), Maarten Altena (cello, bass), Terry Day (percussion, voice)

Russell's is probably the only name which rings a bell in this trio from way back in 1981, a session which has taken nearly two decades to emerge blinking into the arena of publicly available recordings. The other two were long-serving improvisers even back then, but their names are in danger of vanishing into the crevices of history, and so it's nice to have this CD if only to preserve them.

What's really very nice about this session is that the trio played 26 separate pieces, almost all of them very short, which were intended to be cherry-picked from in order to make up a vinyl album. Now, in the age of the CD, Emanem have been able to issue the whole document intact, complete with what one might very tentatively call "alternate takes".

It's pretty hard to tell which tracks are alternate takes of which others; the titles seem to offer clues but, on listening, they also appear to offer false trails disguised in the kinds of dreadful puns and in-jokes which are just another reason why this kind of music isn't considered cool. Well, it hardly matters; the music is cool as can be, and wonderfully invigorating with it.

The shortest tracks are often the best; a few are under a minute, and many more are less than two. The trio crackles, rattles and scrapes as you'd expect, but the concentration which these brief outbursts contain make for much more satisfying listening than a great sprawling jam, with all its inevitable longeurs, could possibly achieve.

Actually, the trio doesn't quite do the kind of so-called "insect music" one might expect. Altena does regularly attack his instrument -- especially his cello -- arco to create the kinds of high-pitched squeaks and rumbling harmonics which are now very familiar, but he also walks his bass as if taking steps on the moon. He has a big, metallic and almost strident pizzicato which is fantastic fun.

Terry Day does some cracking ensemble work, although he's not really a drummer so much as a texturalist and it's hard to judge his playing on any technical level. Certainly it's effective in terms of densities and very occasional rhythmic gestures, but his role here feels rather supportive and it wouldn't be fair to judge him on it (save that for the Amazing Band records).

I suppose it's fair to say that this is a record which won't change your life, but the unusual focus on brevity mustn't be underestimated. These are performances which really milk every second of the music, and there are precious few hour-and-a-quarter CDs of improvised music which manage to achieve that. That's not to say that the longer tracks don't work -- "Emphasis" is nine minutes of full-throttle skittering about which, somehow, never gets dull -- but as a collection of little gems, this is something of a treasure chest.

Richard Cochrane

Jonathan LaMaster's Saturnalia

([Sublingual](#): SLR002)

Jonathon LaMaster (violin, guitar, vocals), Michael Bullock (bass), James Coleman (theremin), Creed Drew (guitar), Keiko Higuchi (vocals, trombone, radio), Greg Kelly (trumpet, one track only), Bill T Miller (sampler), Tatsuya Nakatani (drums), Kory Sylvester (electronic drums, one track only), Vic Rawlings (cello, banjo, sarangi), Robin Amos (synth), Larry Coar (drums), Michael Knobloch (drums), Steve LaMaster (alto sax, one track only), Roger Miller (guitar), Zak Sherzad (reeds), Elliott Sharp (guitar, one track only)

Saturnalia String Trio with Daniel Carter

([Sublingual](#): SLRV1001)

Jonathan LaMaster (violin), Vic Rawlings (cello, sarangi), Mike Bullock (bass), Daniel Carter (reeds, flute, trumpet), Andrew Barker (drums, one track only)

The string trio release is a 7-inch EP; the CD documents two very different studio sessions from 1996 and 1997. The thing is, the name "Saturnalia" doesn't seem to refer to anything very specific; there are three entirely different lineups here, liberally seasoned with guest players of all kinds, the only common thread being Mr LaMaster himself. While that doesn't help us to tag Saturnalia with a neat little description like, I don't know, "jazz-rock improv postmodernists", it certainly makes for intriguing listening.

The first thing that strikes you on hearing these performances (at least if you listen to a lot of experimental music) is how different the tracks all are. The pieces are identified as "improvised", which of course means many things to many people, but if there's no compositional element here than there's certainly an intention to develop and work with riffs, repeated ideas and stable, distinctive textures. This produces something very likeable -- maybe not so single-mindedly rigorous as some performances which doggedly avoid repetition, but much more accessible and just as interesting.

The CD's first set, "Autumn Equinox", is composed of fairly spare tracks with only a handful of the listed musicians playing at any one time, and considerably leavened by the excellent Keiko Higuchi's vocals. Like many avant garde singers, she likes to move between a variety of styles, liltingly lovely on "Evening at the Interplanetary orchestra", alternately lounge-jazzy and monstrously deranged on "Vulcan Martini, or...".

This approach reflects that of this group as a whole; they're eclectic, but within their own confines. "Bottle of Ripple?" is a classic case of cut-n-paste postmodernism, seeing a trashy Status Quo version of Captain Beefheart collide with folky free improv and segueing into "Interlude for Re-Departure", a 25-second death-out which finds time to insert a country parody between the crushing guitar work.

Elsewhere, the group are less prone to aping other styles; they seem to suggest generic sounds rather than quoting or pastiching. It's hard to explain how "Barrage Collage" manages to avoid being just a hip-hop parody, but it does; the wildstyle scratching, collaged samples and noises sound like nothing other than free improvisation, and the references are transformed and made more oblique without being thrown away. Particularly worthy of mention here is Bill T Miller's great sample work. It's billed as "live sampling", but he has a battery of film score snatches, and an extended piece capturing Billy Graham dealing most uncomfortably with the subject of extra-marital sex.

The second half of the CD, "Winter Solstice", is as different as you'd expect it to be given that none of the same musicians appear except LaMaster and Rawlings (for two tracks). On the whole, it sounds something like an authentic prog rock outfit who've forgotten most of the tunes. Driven along by guitar-bass-drums, only a couple of tracks stand to remind the listener of the kinds of things this group were doing for the first half of the disk -- except that the first half was recorded second, as it were, so the chronology feels a bit peculiar.

You either like this kind of thing or you don't. There's a lot of rousing, jamming riffs here and a pleasing absence of self-indulgent solos, but if you're looking for experimentalism then most of these will sound surprisingly tame. The primary exception is "Schizzo Scherzo", which isn't a scherzo but is certainly abrasively mad (it has a narrated bit at the end which someone ought to have excised, but no matter). The contrast between this electrified, soupy fusion (compare with [Screwdriver](#), say, but not the glossier [Ponga](#)) and the more acoustic playing of the first half makes for an interesting and ever-changing listen, a heterogeneous album which, somehow, manages to remain satisfying.

The vinyl is very different again; moody chamber-improv with a filmic edge. It has that classical influence which the name suggests, but also the haunting jazziness of someone like Howard Shore and is very good indeed. The only problem is that the run-out groove was too far in for this writer's turntable, making the music cut out about 5 minutes before the end. Check this won't be a problem for you when ordering, which you ought to; this is pleasant and well-played music with a shade of tonality, unaggressive but never lazy. Daniel Carter plays particularly well with his nasal, Ornettish alto, and whether the trio are playing Bartockian harmonies or scrabbling like scared chickens the music always seems to hang together and take slow, careful steps forward. The whole thing is slightly reminiscent of Ornette's Chappaqua Suite, and it's also nicely hand-packaged in corrugated card fastened with a guitar string. Recommended, and watch out for their CD, due out Autumn

1999, which if this is anything to go by will be an essential purchase.

Richard Cochrane

Roger Smith: Extended Plays

([Emanem](#): 4032)

Roger Smith (guitar), Neil Matcalfe (flute, one track only)

Roger Smith is a lovely player; luxuriant, mellow and lush, with his full harmonies drifting between jazz and classicism. Would it surprise anyone, then, to learn that he's a core member of the second generation of British free improvisors, a collaborator with some of the allegedly harshest players around and an ex-student of Derek Bailey's?

Well, it might, or then again it might not. The free improv scene has long been associated with unremitting brutalism of sound, extremes of dynamic, utter refusal of anything which might be labelled "conservative" or "reactionary", a relentless vanguardism in which only the most anti-traditional survive. That picture is almost wholly incorrect, and to prove it people like Roger Smith are all over the place.

Not that Smith is derivative; he's drawing on traditions, which is different. Apart from the odd gesture, there's not so much jazz here as flamenco and classical music, the traditions most closely associated with the nylon-string he plays. He uses extended techniques but centres them, fittingly, on a very conventional technique of free strokes and rest strokes. One almost imagines him playing with the guitar on his left knee.

This is no chilly concert-hall recital, however. Perhaps it helps to know that Smith likes to play in the small hours of the morning, although these pieces were mostly recorded in the afternoon, but there's something very mellow about this music which suits a late-night listen. However percussive his approach -- and there are the inevitable Baileyisms here, of course, with strings popping, buzzing and slapping against the fingerboard -- it always feels refined, controlled, thoughtful. Oh, and the track with Neil Metcalfe is very nice too (though the sound is a little strange). Metcalfe is a pretty straight, Dolphy-esque flautist with some unexpected twists and turns in his playing; a near-perfect companion for Smith, then, and their fifteen-minute duet is well worth the hearing.

A virtuoso with a lively and very generous imagination, Roger Smith has created here a third solo CD which is a pleasure to sit back and listen to. Guitarists will be impressed (we're always impressed by this kind of thing) but virtually anyone who likes the sound of the classical guitar will get a kick out of these pieces.

Richard Cochrane

Sound of Choice: Dynamics

([Av-Art](#): AACD1006)

Hasse Poulsen (guitars, electronics, voice), Lars Juul (percussion, voice), Fredrik Lundin (reeds, electronics), Lars Møller (reeds, voice), Thomas Sandberg (vibes, percussion, voice)

The underpinning of these pieces is a rattling, percussive tachism formed of junk objects and heavily prepared instruments, but the record as a whole has a surprisingly feelgood vibe. What really makes it work is the use of Lundlin and Moller's rather smooth, melodic saxophone playing. They may often take an atonal approach -- one can hardly comp a chord progression on brake blocks and arco cymbals, after all -- but they're straight out of the Sonny Rollins school, using motifs to develop ideas horizontally in a really quite unexpected but wholly convincing manner.

Once you get past the alarm-clock opening, you could even drift off to sleep to this disk. Which would be a shame, because you'd miss some fascinating music. At their best, Sound of Choice are beautifully understated, and even on tracks like "dynamics 9", a skronk-fest for the two reedmen accompanied by staccato noises, there's a static feel to the music which seems to suspend time rather than making it rush forward. Poulsen is a fine and flexible player, sounding like a cross between Derek Bailey and Larry Coryell on acoustic guitar while passing seamlessly from Keith Rowe-style abstraction to keening Frippian linearity on electric.

When the group goes for a percussion-based onslaught, the result can sound like someone sorting through a big box of spoons, which is rather hard going. When they get this feel right, though, some listeners might be pleasantly reminded of John Stevens' hectic, scattergun textures. These pieces are very much in the minority, in any case, and the overall meditative, thoughtful approach yields music in which every detail matters. Essential for fans of AMM; recommended for just about everyone else, too.

Richard Cochrane

Martin Speake & Nikki Iles: The Tan T'ien

(FMR: CD51V0898)

Martin Speake (alto saxophone), Nikki Iles (piano)

Cool school heaven. Speake's list of influences says it all: Konitz, Bill Evans, Kenny Wheeler and a handful of classical impressionists. The pieces drift along at a medium tempo which is a shade too breezy for a ballad, while lush harmonies, major keys and ruminative solos predominate. The whole thing is like listening to cucumbers.

Half of the eighteen tracks here are based on compositions and half were freely improvised. It's difficult to tell the two approaches apart; the heads which they choose are abstract, limpid affairs executed with offhand simplicity, while most of the free pieces settle quickly into a halo of tonality. There are moments when things get a bit spikier, but not many, and neither player seems comfortable in such uncertain waters.

Speake's tone is pure and radiant, like a thoughtful little angel, and Iles has swallowed Bley and Evans whole; a pairing of fortuitous sympathy given that they are not a "regular" duo. Speake often reminded this listener of Jimmy Giuffre, his brown tone and approach to solos alike, but Giuffre's pleasure at stepping out onto the edge is pretty much absent here, as if the pair are seated in unusually comfortable armchairs. They even have a pop at "Ugly Beauty", and manage to make it sound like "All the Things you Are".

This is sunny, intimate, nobody-gets-hurt music, more about note-choice and phrasing than complicated scale-work, and while there's nothing new or unusual or exciting here it's well-played and eminently listenable. Speake's solos have a logic which is only found in this kind of playing, a neat simplicity which ties up all the loose threads. Nice.

Richard Cochrane

Chris Speed: Deviantics

([Songlines](#): SGL1524-2)

Chris Speed (tenor sax, clarinet), Cuong Vu (trumpet), Skuli Sverrisson (bass), Jim Black (drums, melodica)

The line-up and, to an extent, the sound of this group does, of course, recall Ornette's classic Atlantic sessions. The pianoless quartet, with its two melody instruments capable of elaborating independent, contrapuntal lines without the shackles of a chord progression, was revolutionary then and has proved a durable format. It's the same line-up, for example, as Masada, and it's very close to Time Berne's Bloodcount, of which both Speed and Black are alumni.

Speed has something of Berne about his playing. Like Berne's, it's deeply indebted to Ornette, with its reliance on motivic development and beautifully lilting, zig-zag melodies. Both men also play with a gutsiness which the older player shied away from, perhaps because he really did pay his bar-walking dues and as the composer of "Skies of America" he doesn't care to remember them. Yet few would confuse Speed and Berne; the former has a less querulous tone, a more flowing melodicism than is typical of his erstwhile employer.

All of which is not to imply that he's a laid-back tenor player -- this is a cooking album, it's just not a screaming one -- but his clarinet is as limpid and arch as one might expect. Sverrisson's sole compositional credit, "Tulip", makes lovely use of the instrument, pitted against some very minimal drums and interjections from the trumpet.

What Speed's quartet plays is something akin to the music of "The Shape of Things to Come" or the other discs of that period, but updated primarily by virtue of Jim Black's funky, often rock-oriented drumming. Rarely does this music swing in the way that free jazz often does; one is reminded of the strolling rhythm of "Lonely Woman" rather than Elvin Jones' blasting triplets. Right down to the melodica, Jim Black might look like Jack DeJohnette on paper, but his sound is altogether more modern, and much more open to rock innovations. One suspects him of playing along to Yes albums in the garage during formative years, but that's pure speculation, of course.

The Ornette comparison isn't always helpful, of course. Sverrisson is no Charlie Haden, and unless this writer is much mistaken he's playing fretless bass guitar on this session with a large spoonful of funk which blends with Black's futuristic Brufordisms perfectly. Cuong Vu is a long way from Don Cherry, too, sounding more like a sort of downtown, souped-up and often hot-to-trot reincarnation of Chet Baker. Like Speed, he favours motifs which develop by means of curling scales and pithy little comments. Vu is definitely a name to watch in the future; on the evidence of this session, he's a hugely talented player. If you like Bloodcount, you'll love this, but it's not just a Bloodcount re-tread. There's interesting and fresh stuff going on here for anyone who likes their free jazz exciting, slightly funky, slightly rocky but also just a little bit traditional.

Richard Cochrane

Spontaneous Music Ensemble: Low Profile

([Emanem](#): 4031)

John Stevens (percussion, cornet, voice), Nigel Coombes (violin), Colin Wood (cello), Roger Smith (guitar)

Nobody made music quite like John Stevens. He had that quality which a lot of British free improvisors of his generation had and still have -- an incredible capacity for focusing and never playing down to the audience -- but his personal vision was so downright peculiar that, at first, performances like these can sound more than a little bloody-minded. Yet if anyone has ever managed to record the sound of sheer, unbridled pleasure, the Spontaneous Music Ensemble were probably sitting in front of the mike. They spawned many imitators but few equals, and their music still feels fiercely individual.

Much of this is down to Stevens' now-legendary approach. He seemed above all to love the snap, crackle and pop of the little kits he played; the hard crack of percussion, the impact. His drums never sang like so many free jazzers' did, and that was hard on his first listeners. You can hear it here, too, the way he swats loudly at that tinny snare instead of doing something "tasteful". There was never anything "tasteful" about John Stevens' drumming, and that's one of its strongest points. Because his sense of the boiling, unpulsed flow of free improv is impeccable at every turn, his playing never sounds random or even thoughtless. Just for the fact that this disc is another opportunity to hear Stevens behind a kit, it can hardly fail.

The long piece here -- prefaced by a brief out-take from earlier in the set -- is a live performance by the short-lived quartet incarnation of SME. At this stage (1977) Coombes has a fairly scalar approach, Colin Wood is all over the cello like a rash but Smith is still finding his own sound. It's a towering piece of music, all Bartockian strings and wild percussion (from both Stevens and Smith, whose guitar for the most part is a noise-source here), moving through different combinations of sounds which hold the attention over the full half-hour. Wood and Coombe have a tendency towards drones and quasi-tonal ideas which is unusual, buried as it is within the spikiness to which we're more accustomed.

That aspect is heightened when Stevens picks up the cornet. He wasn't a great cornettist -- and there are too many stories of him turning up for gigs with only the brass instrument, leaving the promoter running around trying to find him a drum kit, for none of them to have been true -- but he used it effectively. On the final track, he gets to stretch his chops out a little, and while it's hardly breathtaking it's not embarrassing either. His voice is another thing; as with the cornet, his preference is for sustained drones. His voice sounds as if he might have been influenced by Tibetan chanting, though it doesn't use the overtone techniques. It has a crudeness which contrasts with his weirdly mercurial drumming, and one wonders whether that lifetime attachment to percussive sounds had something to do with the way he blew his horn, and the way he sang.

A further 35 minutes, spread over two tracks, is given over to the same line-up but without Colin Wood. Although Wood is missed, it's nice that Smith was able to come to the front a little more. Perhaps he also had the added confidence from the fact that his playing had matured enormously in the intervening years, these tracks being from 1984 and '88. Coombes, too, has grown in this time and the rather pretty scales he was using in '77 have been replaced, in part, by more timbral ideas. He does, however, start the piece with a wonderfully Ornette-ish melody, almost as if for the benefit of listeners to this CD. As if to say, *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*. The final track, with that cornet feature, is a lovely, mournful piece and the jazziest of the lot. Smith gets to stretch out a little more here, too, and the results are very pleasant.

In the hagiography of early British improv, Stevens is pretty close to being St Peter, the first Pope of free percussion, with his enigmatic epigrams and little compositions which have sustained many a desultory workshop. Let's not enter into that; Stevens did make some less-than-essential recordings, and some of his projects were not so inspired as others. SME, though, was his baby. It was possibly the purest expression of what he was all about. "Pure" may seem like a strange adjective to attach to this music, which is surprisingly diverse, taking in classical, jazz and world folk musics, but it's pure John Stevens of an ecstatically good vintage.

Richard Cochrane

Statements Quintet: The Cat's Pyjamas

([Leo Lab](#) : CD054)

[Ursel Schlicht](#) (piano), [Hans Tammen](#) (guitar), Dominic Duval (bass), Jay Rosen (drums, percussion), Christoph Irmer (violin)

Dominic Duval, again -- not that we can really say that after his triumphal Equinox Trio disc of just a few months ago. And if that disc was unashamedly Romantic with its vibrato-heavy strings, this one is anything but. It comes from a rattling, scarified world where the debt to Cage which is so great in European improv is more in evidence than any of Duval's recent projects.

Anyway, this isn't a Duval project as such, even if his bass, under the guise of some guitar stomp-boxes, plays the opening notes. Statements started life as a duo of Schlicht and Tammen; a very inventive guitarist in the tachist school -- no pretty arpeggios here, just crocodile clips and objects wedged between the strings -- and a dextrously rhythmic pianist. Tammen does, somehow, manage to keep this kind of playing interesting, probably just by the sheer amount of energy he puts into it. He works wonderfully with Rosen, whose nearly-but-not-quite-jazzy playing holds the group together and encourages them, on tracks like "Living Proof", to ever freakier wiggling-out.

Accordingly he's higher in the mix than drummers normally are -- a brave choice, but the right one. For much of the time, he and Tammen seem almost to be working as a duet, which is no bad thing because the latter is extremely involving and Rosen bounces off him wonderfully. Schlicht, on the other hand, is mixed unusually low, which gives her more of an accompanying role even in a track like "Machine Tools" in which she and the equally-understated Duval play a spacious piece while the others create a backdrop of scratches and clicks.

What's nice here -- apart from the contributions of individual players, especially Rosen and Tammen -- is the discrete identity they manage to lend to each track. On some, for example, Irmer's violin is invisible; on others, like "Sticks in the Throat", his contribution is decisive. Very interesting he is, too, covering similar territory to Mat Maneri, and although he may not have the Chicagoan's layered sophistication as yet, he already has a strong sense of what goes where and his voice is already his own.

And Duval? Well, again, he plays when he needs to and sits out when he doesn't. The mutual respect within this group creates a lot of space in this way and a considerable amount of seat-edge anticipation goes along with it, as the hackneyed routes for group improvisation are frequently abandoned in favour of more unexpected stuff. They don't pussyfoot around -- much of this is fast and furious -- but the energy-music influence sits alongside a more rarefied New Music feel. The equivalent of an un-put-downable book, the sheer exhilaration in the music keeps you listening, and the group's flexibility keeps you guessing while making the many risks it takes pay dividends.

Richard Cochrane

Sun Ra Arkestra meets Salah Ragab in Egypt

([Golden Years of New Jazz](#): GY1)

Sun Ra Arkestra, Cairo Jazz Band and Cairo Free Jazz Ensemble, featuring a cast of (almost) thousands.

This is one of the four debut releases of Leo's new offshoot, "Golden Years of New Jazz", a somewhat ironically-titled label whose intention is to remind us that free jazz has been around for a rather long time, that it's a well-established genre with famous figures, classic recordings and, yes, "golden years".

Vintage Sun Ra recordings spanning over a decade, and featuring large groups of local musicians as well as the Arkestra regulars, whose names history has fortunately (and unusually) recorded even though session dates, in some cases, have been lost. Here we have a track from 1971, three from the early to mid seventies and three from the mid eighties.

Salah Ragab's compositional credit is a thread which crops up on four of these tracks separated by so many years; that and an intangibly Arabic influence to much of the music. I suppose that influence is of the order of cod-Arabic music of the sort Westerners write for film scores, and if Ra or, for that matter, Ragab had deep knowledge of Arabic idioms they're deliberately subjugated to the funky, spaced-out world of jazz as only the Arkestra can do it.

These are mostly pretty hot sessions, and even the latest ones show none of the attachment to saccharine swing which Ra showed during that period. His keyboards create spikes of light in the rattling mayhem of up to ten percussionists. As you might expect, live recordings of such a big, loud band from the early 1970s aren't going to be of magnificent quality, but the atmosphere's all there.

The world pretty much divides into those who get Sun Ra and those who don't. Although associated with free jazz, and too outre for mainstream acceptance, his big-band arrangements and tendency towards tunes and chord sequences tends to alienate the hardcore improv fan. What's left is those of us who love Mingus, Rahsaan and the rest; the misfits who fell between hard bop and the avant garde.

It's an interesting choice for GY1, but its historical sweep and the presence of previously unreleased tracks give it some sense. In the end, it's a great issue of some wonderful material, unified by thematic concerns rather than a particular gig or lineup. That makes for one of the most satisfying albums to listen to end-to-end which this writer has come across bearing the Sun Ra name. Given the simply irresistible appeal of this stuff, it can be recommended to just about anyone. An excellent introduction to the man's work, too.

Richard Cochrane

Tibor Szemo: The Other Shore

([Leo](#): CDLR 281)

Tibor Szemo: Snapshot from the Island

([Leo](#): CDLR 277)

Tibor Szemo is probably best-known as the composer of "Tractatus", an ambitious and decidedly odd project which sets to music the terse words of Wittgenstein's founding work of linguistic philosophy. Well, Wittgenstein may have been popular with the minimalist artists of forty years ago, but Szemo's form of minimalism -- if it can properly be called that, which of course it can't -- sounds modern, glossy and much too eclectic to be really very minimal at all.

The music on these two discs has one thing in common which is obvious immediately: it is rather slow-moving. That's not to say that it's static, drifting music of the sort that Thomas Korner does, because Szemo's compositions have a definite sense of direction. Or rather, they have a sense of momentary direction; it's as if the music moves purposefully minute-by-minute, but has no particular architectural scheme to conform to on the larger scale.

Szemo's world, unlike that of so many composers working with electronics, is largely a sunny one. His "Snapshot from the Island" is infused with sunshine, Oceanic or Caribbean rhythms, and the swooping sound of synthetic gulls decorating his flute. The latter patiently lays down notes as long and cool as a drink of water, creating music which is as pictorial as it gets. As such, of course, it's hugely reliant on convention, but that's okay because Szemo is smart enough to work within those conventions and create a twenty-five-minute-long composition which always feels welcoming, interesting and colourful.

The title track is augmented by two additional pieces on this release. "Water-Wonder" sends overlapping, looped flute gestures piping against one another, sounding something like a miniature organ, echoing and drenched with reverb. Again, there's something magical, pictorial and slightly camp about this music, and while it's certainly less sophisticated than "Snapshot" the fairytale music which results is characteristic and surprisingly elusive. "Let's Go Out and Dance" is the least successful, its 1985 synthesiser textures feeling hackneyed, and without any excuse, given that the imaginative "Snapshot" was recorded only a year later. As with Frank Zappa's work with the Synclavier, the musical ideas are okay but time has been very cruel indeed to the execution, so that it's impossible to hear this music as anything but a very superior version of Rick Wakeman's godawful synth fantasies.

"The Other Shore" comes with a fat booklet containing a Buddhist text and some other experimental writings, all of them impenetrable, which is a good start. The title track certainly delivers on this promise: it's a long, textural piece which features one Onishi Ryokei reciting a sutra (perhaps the one in the booklet, but who knows?) in suitably stentorian tones and, of course, in its original language. It builds slowly until -- and here you'll have to trust me -- a rock drummer and bass guitar appear, and it sounds good. Yes, really; it shouldn't, but it does. The result is a piece which is unique, accessible and downright weird at the same time, and one which will leap into your CD tray with alarming frequency.

This release, too, pairs up the title composition with two other pieces. The first, "Symultan", simultaneously juxtaposes two spoken texts. This is by far the most "difficult" piece on these two discs; the monologues seem to be field recordings of the most dreadful quality, and are accompanied by doleful chimes and disorientating congas (or similar) which constantly threaten to develop into a regular rhythm. This they eventually do, sort of, but it's a limping, drowsy kind of thing, giving the whole piece a rather disturbing air. Needless to say, it's the finest piece on these releases, but it won't go down well at dinner parties the way the tracks from "Snapshot from the Island" will.

The final piece here is a string quartet, augmented by tabla. It's a fairly ambient piece with simple, open harmonies and a languid rhythm, but there's not much to grab the ears about it. Szemo's harmonic schemes often seem engineered deliberately for their directionlessness, but here that approach is at its most pronounced. Rather a shallow composition, if not offensively so.

These two discs document the work of a composer who seems to care little about the fashions of contemporary music, and less still about the need to be "difficult". Szemo's attachment to folk musics may be naive, and his approach may often be too saccharine for many listeners, but there is a fertile imagination at work behind these compositions. "The Other Shore" is probably the most satisfactory of the two, but the title track of "Snapshot from the Island" makes it worth looking into, too.

Richard Cochrane

Tibor Szemo: Invisible Story

([Leo](#): CDLR312)

Tibor Szemo (narration, electronics, composition), [The Gordian Knot Company](#)

Szemo is one of the few composers exploring the fertile communion of music with the spoken word. Here he narrates the writings of compatriot Bela Hamvas, accompanied by his own music realised, in a manner similar to that used on the lovely ["The Other Shore"](#) (also on [Leo](#)), by a combination of his own synthesiser arrangements and the Gordian Knot Company.

Listeners expecting something similar to the meditative works on that CD, however, will be in for a few surprises here. The Gordian Knot Company appear to have transformed themselves into a rock band, and the sound-world is often much closer to prog than the new-agey washes of "The Other Shore" or "Snapshot from the Island". Sometimes this is a little forced; the up-tempo track "Idols and Fetishes" sounds at best like Laurie Anderson but at worst like some hideous West-Coast eighties fusion offering, all poxy drum machines and squealing, union-rates guitar sounds.

Much of this music is, thankfully, of the quiet, sparse kind which Szemo does so well. The synths imitate mournful flutes and violins, and rhythms, although somewhat clockwork in their regularity, are ticked out rather minimally, with heavier accents falling at large intervals, so that the group gives the impression of floating above their own music. To repeat, when Szemo tries to get macho it doesn't work -- "Danger" is marred by over-heavy accented beats and an awful mechanical rhythm -- but in the majority of cases the powerful instrumental force is marshalled for more peaceful purposes. Even a risky funky organ riff by the composer on the final track doesn't spoil things, because it simply reinforces by contrast the overall atmosphere of enervation and repose.

The words are, of course, in Hungarian, so unless one speaks the language they can be simply treated as melodic and sonorous material, although in fact they're fascinating fragments from the kind of Romantic maverick for which Eastern Europe seems to have been a glasshouse in the first half of the twentieth century. In any event, Szemo's voice is gorgeously rich and vibrant, speaking in a mellow half-whisper, making the lead instrument something well-suited to soothing the savage beast within.

The music here is ambitious and doesn't always make its mark. One would have preferred longer versions of pieces like "Sirius Beta" and "Mysterium" and less of the rocky stuff, but that material is where Szemo is challenging himself and it seems he feels the need to try it. Something great may come of it, but for now it renders this a bit of a curate's egg. The parts which are good are, however, lovely.

Richard Cochrane

Hans Tammen: Endangered Guitar

([Nur/Nicht/Nur](#): No number)

Hans Tammen (guitar)

The sleeve notes mention "stringency", and there's something in that word to describe Tammen's very individual approach on this lovingly-packaged, well-documented solo disc. Tammen, who will be known to many readers from this year's widely-acclaimed [Statements Quintet](#) album, takes an almost monkish approach to his instrument, a precision and asceticism which makes "pure sounds" his goal. What's surprising, if that's the case, is how good-natured, entertaining and, yes, how musical it all is.

Nur/Nicht/Nur specialise in "experimental sound productions", and owner Dieter Schlensoog has said that he is unsure whether what he releases on the label is music at all. Tammen certainly doesn't play tunes, if that's the sort of thing Schlensoog is thinking of. Laying his guitar flat, he "plays" it with an electric fan, violin bows, stones, cymbals and the rest of the now rather familiar repertoire of guitar extensions. That kind of approach is often associated with a search for richness, a kaleidoscopic range of timbral effects, employed in the interests of self-expression, which is, however, not what's happening here.

The very fact that this is a solo disc, with only three (out of twenty) tracks using overdubs, gives away some of the eremitic simplicity of his vision. These sounds don't create a nice sensual texture or a solo against an accompaniment. No, they stand on their own, as inscrutable as the little piles of stones in a Zen garden. It's no wonder the sleeve notes also refer to this as a "collection", a "catalogue" of sounds. But this is no dry technical handbook, no report of Tammen's sonic discoveries, or at least it's not simply that.

In order to understand this, one has to accept that there is an aesthetic of the catalogue, the unadorned list, the presentation of objects without narrative. Think of Perec's "La Vie, Mode d'Emploi", or the lists which proliferate in "Finnegans Wake", or think of Damian Hirst's sculptures like "Against the Tide" which collect objects and present them, as if in a museum, only stripped of any didactic intention or informational content. If there can be a beautiful elegance in the spartan collection and presentation of objects supposedly without style, without finesse, then that aesthetic also extends to Tammen's "Endangered Guitar", a lovely simplicity which, like all simplicity, is complexity in disguise.

The pieces themselves -- most of which are fairly short -- generally take a guitar setup and run with it, producing sounds and developing them in deceptively straightforward ways. The result is bewitching. What sounds as if it's going to be an okay-in-small-doses record, crammed as it is with fairly nasty scraping, piercing high frequencies and percussive noise, captivates you and won't let you turn it off. It's astringent, yes, but the clarity with which Tammen works infuses the whole thing with a lightness which just keeps you listening. In a year which has already seen quite a few really excellent solo guitar releases ([Gilbert Isbin](#) and [Roger Smith](#), to name but two very recent ones) "Endangered Guitar" stands comfortably alongside them. Very highly recommended.

Richard Cochrane

Giancarlo Nicolai/John Tchicai: The Giancarlo Nicolai Trio And John Tchicai

([Leo](#): CDLR164)

John Tchicai (tenor and soprano saxes, voice), Giancarlo Nicolai (guitar), Thomas Durst (bass), Ueli Müller (drums).

It is a credit to his instincts that Tchicai called in Nicolai's trio when, one night in Switzerland, his Danish band were unable to get to a gig. Tchicai has a history of working with adventurous guitarists but this -- a call to a man he had never heard or met -- must have felt like going out on a limb. Perhaps there were few other options that night. Whatever, things went so well that he continued to work with the group, and this album documents their collaboration.

Tchicai has a long track record and, unusually, his compositions are often as valued as his solos. Here, he contributes two uncharacteristically blockish statements -- faux-naïf blowing vehicles, but successful for all that. This is, after all, a jamming band with plenty of common ground between the four men, who are happiest when given a theme and told to run around with it. Not for Tchicai this time, then, those brow-furrowing heads which make albums like Timo's Message so rediscoverable.

Nicolai's compositions are more complicated and less likeable, but his solo work is instantly involving. He has strong jazz credentials, having mastered the mercurial double-time flow so characteristic of players in the Joe Pass tradition, as well as developing an excellent ear for harmonisation which he has not always had cause to demonstrate in the past. Alongside these skills he places Sharrock-derived percussive fireworks and the clicks and plops and scratches most often associated with Derek Bailey.

In his integration of these techniques, Nicolai is something of an original. Certainly he is a conservative: his playing seems always to strive to connect the abrasions of freeform with an image of bebop derived more from contemporary revivalists than from anything anyone was doing in 1940. Objections of self-appointed vanguardists notwithstanding, though, his is a strong voice and a sharp ear, always ready with the turn-on-a-ha'penny so essential to survival in music as underdetermined as this. If his occasional use of digital delay is rather gimmicky and mechanistic, it is no more so than any other effort along the same lines, and a lot more thoughtful than most. Strange to think of the pointy-scratchy stuff that he was doing with Hans Koch and Peter Schaerli more than ten years ago.

Tchicai meets the joint leader at least halfway. He would be most strongly reminiscent of Garbarek, were it not for his iron tone -- a grinding, resonant yell which, on Ascension, made even Coltrane sound a little blanched -- and deep jazz roots. Here, his solos are of top quality. In the presence of Nicolai, he does not feel the need to paint himself into a generic corner; instead, his solos rock gently from fiery free jazz to tender ballad playing to random skronk, which sounds as if it's just the way he likes it.

This is not an album which breaks any boundaries, but it certainly sounds like four people in perfect tune playing whatever they want to, without ideological constraints. This kind of session is a valuable reminder that there is more than one valid route in contemporary improvised music, and those for whom hardboiled abstraction is an unpalatable dish should order without hesitation.

Richard Cochrane

David Toop and Max Eastley: New and Rediscovered Musical Instruments

(Virgin: CDOVD478)

Max Eastley (sculptures), David Toop (voice, guitar, chordophone, flute), Frank Perry (percussion), Paul Burwell (percussion), Brian Eno (bass guitar), Hugh Davies (grill harp)

Max Eastley's kinetic sculptures are things of ingenious beauty coaxed into song by wind and flowing rivers, but nobody needs half a CD's worth of their clanking, bubbling or wobbly noises. This recording may have been made with documentary intentions, but isolating the auditory component of Eastley's environmental art actually does his work a considerable disservice because the object's physical presence and location are lost. Historically resonant stuff, linking up Eno's early imprimatur with the dark ambient and deep listening preoccupations of a quarter century later, but it's an unrewarding listen.

The rest of this broken-backed album is given over to three tracks by Toop. "Do the Bathosphere [sic]" features Toop's weedy, can't-sing voice in a very fleetingly diverting piece of English whimsy. "The Divination of the Bowhead Whale", an ensemble piece, features the album's best music, while "The Chairs Story" is a multitracked eco-dirge about seals and frogs. Very much of its time.

Richard Cochrane

This review first appeared in Hollow Ear magazine

JACQUES TREMBLAY -- Alibi (Diffusion i Media: IMED9842)

Jacques Tremblay (electroacoustic compositions)

Jacques Tremblay's world is a pretty frightening one. Taking his cue from traditional concerns of musique concrete, his music is cinematic, narrative-based and populated by many recognisable sound-sources. Take the lovely "Oaristys", which the composer rather worryingly describes as "erotic". It moves programmatically through six stages of a sexual encounter, each one populated by disturbing, disembodied sounds, cavernous echoes and intense dissonances. Maybe this just goes to show subjective any "program" will be, attached to any music, even in this most illustrative genre.

Given that "Oaristys" is Tremblay's tender ballad, no wonder tracks describing "the unconscious, prowling and searching for a way to enter the fissured wall of memory" or "the cruelties that man has committed in the name of God" are a long way from blissed-out ambiance. While the musical content of these pieces is in itself enjoyable enough, the concrete sounds (including spoken words, water, footsteps; the usual things) create a considerably more all-encompassing atmosphere of nastiness. It's as well that Tremblay puts enough musicality into what he does that you feel you want to keep listening. It's something like watching a horror movie with your eyes shut.

The last two tracks are less conceptually scary, but just as edgy. "Rictus Nocturne" is the composer's tribute to jazz, and oddly enough it's the world of mushy standards which gets the treatment. Still, apart from the odd, obvious sample, what Tremblay is doing here is using the notion of the "jam session", the informal, after-hours playing where much experimentation often goes on. Combining a variety of electronic techniques under no particular theoretical rubric, Tremblay creates a altogether abstract work of music with very little to do with jazz; though it's a lot of fun. "Jeu d'Ondes" is a short piece sampling sounds from a yacht (both the boat and the water) and completely re-frying them to produce another abstract composition.

Tremblay's relationship to his sources is ambiguous, transforming some beyond recognition while leaving others untouched. Often, as on the first and final tracks, the results are extremely dramatic; in "Oaristys" they are strangely beautiful.

Richard Cochrane

Trio Chroch: Live at Dexter

([Av-Art](#): AACD1009)

Christoffer Sten Moller (piano, keyboards, trumpet, voice), Robert Cole Rizzi (guitar, electronics, percussion, voice), Chano Olskaer (percussion, voice)

Trio Chroch play what in more innocent days might have been called fusion; there's certainly much of the acid-fuelled wig-outs of the Mahavishnu orchestra or Love Cry Want in this funky but slippery blend of rock.jazz, eletronics and improv.

Take Rizzi's guitar playing, which spirals like McLaghlin's, but with only a hint of the latter's technical prowess. Instead, Rizzi employs energy and an exuberance audible in his tone to push the music around. It's very effective: the last thing a band like this needs is some masturbatory guitar-mag guitarist peeling off hot licks. This is, like the best early fusion to which it tips a wink, music consumed by atmosphere, rhythm and texture, not the technical virtuosity which came to dominate the genre later.

To speak of "genre" in a record like this is, however, already to have assumed too much. This recording, although deeply rooted in something which used to be called "fusion", makes many other generic connections -- check out "number 5"'s fake Chinoiserie -- and in some cases simply breaks the rules altogether, as when strange vocal noises enter into the mix.

While not, perhaps, deeply flattering to any individual involved, it's as a group project that this recording is really designed to work. The trio's capacity for conjuring up imaginative sonic territories and exploring them with a thoroughness which never becomes merely homogeneous is a rare thing indeed. Recommended.

Richard Cochrane

Trio Nuevo Finlandia: Ha! What's Going On?

([Leo Lab](#): CD046)

Baron Paakkunainen (flute, alto flute, soprano sax, tenor sax, baritone sax), Eero Ojanen (piano), Teppo Hauta-Aho- (bass, cello, siren)

I can't recommend this highly enough, although it would be easy enough to overlook. I have no idea whether there's something in the clear mountain air which makes people play like this but, cliché as it is, the best comparison to be drawn with this disk is the Scandinavian jazz from two decades ago which most of us got to know through the ECM label. This owes much more to the free improv tradition, but its links with the West Coast experiments of Giuffrè and Tristano, its use of space and preference for delicacy over bluster, are all important points of contact.

Paakkunainen is a lyrical, economical player with a rather poised approach which sits well in this setting. His work is in itself very listenable, but this is mostly not a solos-and-accompaniment deal; it would be nice to hear him in such a situation, and I suspect he would pull it off beautifully, but here he has the discipline to let Ojanen's Bley-like piano or Hauta-Aho's bass occupy an equal amount of space.

This is an approach which pays dividends. Far from being a standard rhythm section, these two push the music around, form new ideas and run off with them. Often, what begins sounding like a free improv piece grows into something thematic, if not exactly tonal or tune-based. They generate and develop material rather than simply using the "moment form" so beloved of many British groups.

This is a fresh kind of cool school, developing out of a familiar tradition but with a sharply contemporary edge. If, like so many people, you came to free music through Garbarek, Bley, Frisell and Motian, this will be more than a nostalgia trip. It will serve as a reminder of what could be so exciting about that music when first encountered -- its strangeness but unaccountable accessibility, the spark of dynamic interplay between abstraction and melody.

Richard Cochrane

Dominic Duval and Joe McPhee: The Dream Book

([Cadence](#): CJR1105)

Joe McPhee (alto sax, trumpet), Dominic Duval (bass)

Trio X: Rapture

([Cadence](#): CJR1106)

Joe McPhee (sax), Jay Rosen (drums), Dominic Duval (bass, electronics), Rosi Hertlein (violin, voice)

Dominic Duval's String Ensemble: Live in Concert

([Cadence](#): CJR1097)

Jason Hwang (violin), Tomas Ulrich (cello), Dominic Duval (bass), Joe McPhee (tenor sax, trumpet), Mark Whitecage (reeds)

I

It's obvious enough just by listening to him that Joe McPhee has a lot of Ornette in his playing. He has a firm, slightly nasal tone on alto which carries his mostly slow-moving melodies beautifully without ever sounding merely derivative. Although his career is three decades old, McPhee never sounds like a man who is going through the motions of a career which has become irrelevant. Instead, he keeps on growing and continues to surprise; the plasticity of his sound is amazing, and his ability to move with absolute precision between blues and complete abstraction rarely fails.

He's been working with Duval -- now a much-heralded young player in that corner of free jazz which doesn't consider neo-conservatism an option -- for years now, and when the saxophonist was invited to stage a series of concerts at the Knit it seems he knew who to call. The duets which comprise "The Dream Book", an overt tribute to Ornette and his principal co-conspirators from the sixties, are relaxed and generous as their dedicatee's music often is, with Duval's bass strolling along under the rolling saxophone, the two zig-zagging happily through a reconstruction of those simple harmolodic ideas seen from the perspective of a third of a century. Without reviving or reverently re-performing anything, the pair manage to get a whiff of the aura of those records and put it in a contemporary setting. And however fond we might be of Coleman's trumpet-playing activities, McPhee is by far the more technically able on the instrument.

The Trio X session is as different as you like. It begins with a brief, stentorian solo from Duval, which moves smoothly into a forty-seven minute marathon. Hertlein, a figure previously unknown to this writer and, it seems, producer Bob Rusch, makes the trio a quartet and contributes pretty much equally with the others in a performance which does just what you'd expect, but not always in the ways you think it will.

Unless under the direction of Cecil Taylor -- and there's certainly a whiff of Taylor here, particularly in Hertlein's Leroy Jenkins-like violin -- improvisations of this length tend to go in waves, with periods of high energy alternating with calmer passages. Well, that's what happens, except that the piece always seems to move at a slow tempo, and the quieter passages are often the more furious ones. Inspired by the "Negro National Hymn" "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing", the louder passages rise to a slow-burning peak rather than simply becoming faster and more dissonant until the musicians can no longer keep up with one another.

Elsewhere, moments like Duval's electronic treatments of Hertlein's voice to create a gentle but rather metallic, keening line may be "quiet bits" but they're a long way from water-treading. There seems to be a genuine attempt here to get away from standard free jazz values: loud + fast = passionate, quiet + slow = sensitive. Playing at this length generally drops straight into that trap -- but not this playing. There's a huge range of different instrumental arrangements within this piece, and one never feels that the musicians are in competition. One very useful point of contact would be Albert Ayler's engagements with marching music, and some of the same preference for steady musical progression rather than frantic spiralling is at the heart of this performance.

It will come as no surprise by now to find that the string ensemble disc -- composed of two Knit gigs, one with McPhee as guest and the other with younger player Mark Whitecage -- is entirely different again. The String Ensemble, like the CT String Quartet which adds Ron Lawrence, is overtly classically-minded, with no particular jazz connections, until one thinks (again) of Taylor's work with the Cecil Taylor Unit (for whom the CT quartet is named) or Ornette's compositions for strings. The group don't use masses of extended techniques so much as multi-layered melodic improvisations in which ideas seem to move at different speeds, in different directions, simultaneously.

As Duval points out, the two guests use rather different strategies when confronted by the dauntingly complex music which this trio can produce (a minor complaint -- sure, it's obvious when listening, but Cadence's habit of

withholding basic information like who plays on which tracks is somewhat irritating here). Whitecage dives into the maelstrom as an equal partner, and the music they make together is unified ensemble playing of a high order. This writer has never heard the reedsman in such convincing form as here, and the fact that the lesser-known player has the lion's share of the time on this release is a bonus.

McPhee, on the other hand, takes a very bullish stand and makes himself the soloist and the trio, however robust, his accompanists. the music certainly seems to flow better when Whitecage is in the saxophone chair; the tracks with McPhee are gloriously loud and lary but certainly feel less substantial. His trumpet is far more ensemble-oriented than his tenor, and much better-suited to the setting, but ultimately Whitecage's tracks here are the real revelation. It would be nice to think of Whitecage working with this trio more in the future.

Record labels like doing this sort of thing, releasing three discs featuring the same people in one go. Perhaps it's in the hope that the late nineties will be thought of as Duval's important "Cadence years" by future jazz historians, although it's probably just because the three sessions were all excellent recordings and it's a shame to eke them out. Excellent they certainly are, and it leaves reviewers with the difficult but rather inescapable task of recommending one of them. Assuming that the comments above haven't swung your wallet one way or another, this writer humbly recommends the Trio X session, but you really can't go wrong with any of these.

Richard Cochrane

Matt Turner: The Mouse That Roared

(Meniscus: MNSCS002)

[Matt Turner](#) (cello)

Michael Bisio & Eyvind Kang: MBEK

(Meniscus: MNSCS005)

Michael Bisio (bass), Eyvind Kang (violin)

Matt Turner puts a lot of energy into these seven improvisations, recorded live way back in 1997 and only now seeing the light of day on the new (and already impressive) Meniscus label. His style incorporates many of the so-called "extended techniques" you'd expect to see at a contemporary cello festival (where this *ig* took place), but structured in rather direct ways, with none of the disregard for large-scale forms which is so common in improvised music.

Not that this music seems to be governed by actual large forms of any kind; it's just that it proceeds in an orderly fashion, developing an idea and then moving away from it and into a new area with deliberate clarity. The almost discursive quality of these pieces makes them very accessible, and they're certainly imaginative and enjoyable. Still, there's a little something missing, and at times it feels a little like avant improv by numbers. Many listeners will enjoy this record, but few will find it truly arresting in the way that less genteel improv can be.

Turner would almost certainly fare better with other musicians, where their surprise interventions would disturb what sounds like a mind with an inclination towards tidiness, and what he would produce in such a setting might be very good indeed. Certainly the duo of Bisio and Kang hit some stratospheric highs on their CD, *Mbek*. Kang will be known to many readers as a violinist of eclectic but always exciting vision, a young player who will only become better-known in future years; the lesser-known Bisio turns out to be something of a force of nature on the bass, and the two together make fearsome music.

Although the highlight of their album is the first track, a soaring, unashamedly Romantic piece called *Seraphic Light*, there are plenty of great moments and throughout. Kang's interest in musics from around the world comes across many times over, and Bisio sounds interested and educated enough to follow him, although he generally seems to prefer surging around arco, creating a truly vast sound from the bass through which Kang effortlessly slices.

Inevitably, there are bits which falter, floundering around trying to get back on track. That's in the nature of improvisation, and while Turner avoids these and turns in a performance of great coherence, he does seem to lack for a partner to make things a little more dangerous and throw down a few challenges. That's just the sort of thing Bisio and Kang do well together, and the results are excellent.

Richard Cochrane

Matt Turner: Crushed Smoke

([Tautology](#): 014)

Matt Turner (cello)

Joachim Gies: Whispering Blue

([Leo Lab](#): CD074)

Joachim Gies (reeds)

Brian Allen: Solo Trombone

([Braintone](#): No Number)

Brian Allen (trombone)

Solo recordings are one of those things which can be fantastic or dreadful depending on the approach taken. Some people appear to think that somebody out there wants to listen to an hour of them showing off various techniques or practicing new ones. Not these two: both Gies and Turner have done it before (recording solo, that it), and both choose to turn in CDs full of music rather than practice tapes.

Turner's disk is one of those that just won't stop jumping into your CD player. He characterises it as noise-based, and it certainly uses the extremes of the acoustic cello's sonic possibilities, but the attention to detail here is wonderful and Turner's discipline in sticking to an idea and developing it with care and attention is remarkable. We've heard him in a solo setting before (["The Mouse That Roared", on Meniscus](#)) and been impressed by this ability to focus but expressed reservations about a certain, well reservation in his playing. Not so here; the more extreme timbres, and perhaps a more relaxed atmosphere, enable him to really open up.

There are some pieces here which work in part because of the extreme limitations of the palette, like certain paintings done all in shades of blue (Picasso, Kandinsky), or in contiguous areas of clashing colour (Klee). "Smoking Carnivore" is one of these, created mainly from the sound of the bow being scraped too hard and too slowly across the strings. The resulting sound is perhaps similar to but not as radical as Hand Tammen's "Styrofoam", but the very decision to use a cello rather than something more suited to the production of these kinds of sounds allows the instrument's more recognisable timbres to occasionally leak through. The overall effect is something like a brutal modernist painting done on top of something trivially pretty, the palimpsest of Romanticism (if you can pardon the pretentiousness for a moment) peering out from the patina of the contemporary. Nothing could be more postmodern or, frankly, more fun.

At times, Turner reminds this writer of Tammen in other ways, too; his approach to extreme and sometimes blackboard-scrapingly nasty timbres is similarly unflinching. But there are moments of real, if savage, beauty on this record. The two tracks featuring electric cello are a bit less raw and characterful, but they're quite funky and oddly reminiscent of the opening of Gies's solo outing.

Just as Turner sometimes turns to percussive, pulsing structures within which to make things happen, as on the bow-bouncing "Tap", Gies opens with a circular-breathing piece composed on a bed of cyclic key-clicks above which long, trilling notes appear as if by magic. They appear, of course, when Gies increases air-pressure and turns the clicks into notes, but somehow the brain, which is used to hearing rhythms with melodic phrases superimposed over them, hears it that way instead. It's clever and cool and instantly appealing.

Not everything here is so accessible, but it's all of good quality. The music, as the title suggests, is often very quiet and rather subtle, but then so is Turner's supposedly "noise"-based CD. There are differences, though -- big, important differences. Turner and Gies both enjoy extended techniques, but the cellist allows them to inform his musical choices (which is a perfectly valid and, in his case, effective way of proceeding) while Gies gives the impression of being in full control deploying notes slowly and quietly into an enigmatic silence.

There are some technically astounding things on here -- the things Gies can do with a trombone mouthpiece wedged into the neck of a tenor sax must be heard to be believed -- but that's not really the point. As with Turner, weird techniques may be the starting-point for some of these pieces but they certainly aren't the end they aim at. Gies creates music of real vividness, and that's what makes this CD extremely good.

Allen's self-released CD-R may be less high-profile, but it reveals a lesser-known talent who may do bigger things. He's something like an old-fashioned pit-orchestra trombonist, fond of slapstick effects and noises; he weaves them into a music which owes at least as much to brass band and folk music as it does to jazz.

The twenty tracks here are mainly short expositions of ideas. Allen's technique isn't entirely secure, but then people who go in search of this sort of record don't expect perfection), and in fact this very quality of slight shakiness adds to the down-home feel. One hopes this isn't patronising; Allen has a genuine love of the less

prestigious traditions of his instrument, and that's what gives this recording much of its character.

There are some real moments of musical imagination here, too; in the punningly-titled "Berne Baby Berne", he takes a mournful, descending melody which could come from a spiritual or a colliery band and passes it through a series of perfectly logical transformations, an achievement which points, perhaps, to deeper things beyond the frankly very enjoyable fun and games.

Richard Cochrane

Ullman, Gebhard: Ta Lam Zehn

([Leo Records](#): CDLR290)

Hinrich Beermann (sax), Daniel Erdmann (sax), Thomas Klemm (sax), Jurgen Kupke (clarinet), Joachim Litty (reeds), Theo Nabicht (reeds), Heiner Reinhart (bass clarinet), Volker Schlott (reeds), Gebhard Ullmann (reeds), Hans Hassler (accordeon)

Dolmen Orchestra: Sequenze Armoniche

([Leo Records](#): CDLR291)

Pino Melfi (trumpet), Marco Sannini (trumpet), Alfredo Sette (trumpet), France Angiulo (trumbone), Michele Marrano (french horn), Nino Bisceglie (tuba), Paola Cicoella (flute), Nicola Puntillo (clarinets), Vittorio Gallo (sax), Felice Mezzina (sax), Gaetano Partipilo (sax), Pasquale Gadaleta (bass), Antonio Dambrosio (drums), Aldo Bagnoni (percussion), Armanda Desider (percussion), Linda Bsiri (voice, sea trumpet), Michel Godard (tuba, serpent), John Surman (sax), Nicola Pisani (conducting), Vico Miloli (trumpet, one track only), Enrico Del Gaudio (percussion, one track only), Giovannangelo De Gennaro (voice)

Sun Ra: Live at Praxis '84

([Leo Records](#): GY5/6)

Sun Ra (keys), Ronnie Brown (trumpet), Marshall Allen (reeds), Elodie Omoe (reeds), John Gilmore (reeds), Danny Ray Thompson (reeds), James Jackson (reeds), Rollo Redford (bass), Matthew Brown (conga), Don Mamford (drums), Salah Ragab (conga) [NB most musicians play numerous instruments]

"Big Band Jazz": not the first phrase which springs to mind when considering the world's avant garde musics of the late twentieth century. And so it has turned out to be, because free jazz has never been a big-money game, and big bands cost big money, so the results don't take much working out. On the slightly more mainstream side of the weird music continuum, however, bandleaders have long enjoyed trying ambitious experiments which, as is in the nature of such things, sometimes work and sometimes don't.

One of those bandleaders, and the most legendary, was Sun Ra. This disk reissues a triple vinyl release now unavailable, and documents what appears to be an entire, two-hour concert by the Arkestra from 1984. At this point, Ra had lost much of his avant garde following and gone some distance on a journey down a road few would follow him on, a rediscovery of some of the kitscher elements of big band jazz in which he had always had a prurient interest. So here we get "Somewhere Over the Rainbow", "Mack the Knife", "Days of Wine and Roses" and "Satin Doll" in amongst the free-fall improvisations and outer-space chants.

Many of those arkestral improvisations are, as most Ra fans will eventually admit, pretty unlistenable, and there's a really baggy example here, but what's pleasing is that there's not too much of that nonsense and that we have plenty of Ra playing in smaller groupings and especially solo, something he was weirdly good at. His cocktail cheesiness intercut with funky blues and atonal splatters must have sounded pretty radical in '84, and even more radical back when he started doing it, but these days every Tom, Dick and Harry does inter-genre collages and the whole thing can sound a little cheap. Yes, these solos do manage to make some musical sense, but in the end there's a tameness here which isn't in his earlier work.

You either like this side of Ra or you don't. Those who do would argue, one supposes, that his cross-fertilisation of Henry Mancini with Cecil Taylor raises profound questions about the history of jazz, which it undoubtedly does, but that's a dubious reason for wanting to own the record. Add to that the fact that this is a not-very-good recording of a band who sound tired and sloppy and it's not a terribly attractive proposition. Ra completists won't find it's the worst thing in their collections by a long chalk, but it's by no means the man at his best, not even for this period.

The Dolmen Orchestra are a jazz band retrieving and altogether different musical tradition into their free jazz base -- that of the Gregorian chant. It sounds grim, like a bunch of people whistfully playing prettied-up Medieval music for the benefit of a middle-brow audience that like to think it's being adventurous. Well, this isn't hardcore avantgardia here, but it's not rubbish either. Indeed, these five compositions, each by a different bandmember, manage to use the Gregorian elements in an almost entirely covert way, enabling their origins slyly to elude the casual listener.

They do get close to easy listening briefly with Nico Marziliano's "Contemplation for a Sacral Sequence", which is pretty horrible unless you like your jazz to sound a bit like a very good overture to a West End musical; the title track has moments like this, too, and it can be a bit upsetting. This, though, isn't the rule, and the track which follows Marziliano's, "Ferma l'Ali" by impressive tubist Michel Godard, comes on like something by Berio with its swooping female voice and controlled but chaotic-sounding band. The high points of this record are truly marvellous; the low points low only for being inoffensive, lazy, unremarkable. By contrast the opener, "Sequenza", is remarkable, one of those starts to an album which promise more than the following hour can

possibly deliver.

Ullmann's big band is an all-reeds one, playing his own compositions which have a tendency to fuse jazz with both '20s Modernism (think Hindemith, Stravinsky and Weill) and various "world" musics, particularly the folk musics of the Middle East. Ullmann has the finest sense of orchestration of anyone represented on the four disks considered here, and by quite some distance; his ability to spread his big, thick harmonies around so that they shimmer into life is extremely impressive.

He's helped by the fact that the band are a fine one, and the soloists make strong, intelligent statements under what are often loud and harmonically complicated conditions. He's also helped by his ability to write good tunes, with enough tricky convolutions to keep the free jazz fans happy. This is positively big band jazz -- not the accretion of small groups which the Arkestra generally breaks down into, nor the pretty much through-composed music of the Dolmen Orchestra but a music which genuinely fuses big tunes and funky arrangements with integral improvisation.

"Ta Lam Zehn" is very impressive stuff, and if you like your jazz sharp and spikey but composed, you'll be hard-pushed to do better than this. Proof that using composition doesn't mean taking the easy route out, the only reservation one might have is that early Modernist connection; this music does sound a bit quaint, and not very contemporary. If that doesn't bother you -- and really, why should it? -- this set of clever, well-constructed and exuberantly-played pieces is a real treasure.

Richard Cochrane

Fred Van Hove: Flux

([Potlatch](#) : P2398)

Fred Van Hove (piano)

John Corbett's sleeve notes claim an analogy between solo improvisation and shadow-boxing. That's as may be, but Van Hove feels very much like he's landing every heavyweight punch he throws on these two marathon outings. Frequently occupying the bass register with his high-impact, staccato ostinati, his music can often be bludgeoningly loud and irritably angular.

Yet that's only half the story. If Van Hove can pound you into submission, he can also find a sweet, rhythmically ambiguous place among the higher notes. His right hand seems to dance across the keys, so intense is the illusion of movement in his playing, yet there's no hint of gestural sketchiness. Like Crispell, who he can quite strongly resemble at times, he has an ability to weld rhythmic and melodic shapes to logical harmonies. This can sometimes give his playing the air of Messiaen's more complex solo keyboard works.

It also completely side-steps the Cecil Taylorisms to which many avant garde pianists are prone. For all his whizz-bang technical fireworks, Van Hove's connections with Taylor are not his high-definition runs or the occasional cluster, but the impression that, at the centre of the whirlwind, careful thought is being put into the form of the piece and the development of its ideas.

Van Hove's playing may be closer to Modernism than to anything else, but there's a strong jazz connection here too. In particular, his left-hand strategies are often of the bass-line variety, while a hint of boogie woogie even surfaces now and again. His right hand can sometimes recall the great rock 'n' roll players, while a rhythmical reference to ragtime can occasionally be discerned within the tempestuous world he creates.

There's not much to separate these two long pieces -- each follows a similar path in its own fashion. Each has a ferocity which is all the more intimidating for its being so apparently casual, and each proceeds by generating and then transforming fairly simple materials, creating an organic flow of music with a surface which bristles with detail. One is reminded of Salieri in Schaeffer's *Amadeus*: if there really are only so many notes one can listen to in one evening, the audience at *Les Instants Chavires* must have gone home with hemi-demi-semiquavers dropping out of their ears. Like Mozart, though (and there's a comparison Van Hove can't have had too often), his superficial complexity compliments a formal elegance.

This double CD represents a technical, creative and athletic tour de force. Those who thrive on this level of intensity will find their ears very pleasingly crammed. It's also worth noting that, for a live document of such astonishingly loud music, the recording is very clear and not at all muddy.

Richard Cochrane

The Unsound Automatic Starter Kit

([Unsound Automatic](#) : UACD001)

Tracks by Chris Hartford, Livestock, Andrea Rocca vs Bruco Lava, Radioactive Sparrow, Homo-Genetic Arsonist, Tony Gage, Richard Bowers, Simply Keys

Unsound Automatic are a new CD label based in London, although they've been active as a collective in Cardiff for some years. Their website gives a clearer idea of the breadth of their interests -- from music to painting, film and writing. Reviews of their releases by [Radioactive Sparrow](#) and [Homo-genetic Arsonist](#), both of whom are represented here, can be found elsewhere at (musings).

The trash aesthetic of those two releases is manifested in the opening tracks -- an embarrassingly fey comedy song by Chris Hartford and a unlistenablely messy live noise-plus-shouting-fest from Livestock. Well, you either like those kinds of things or you don't, but it's a typically uncompromising strategy for the label to open its sampler with two tracks almost guaranteed to get most people to turn it off.

Things improve enormously from there on in, so the persistent are indeed rewarded. Most particularly, what immediately follows is the first of two pieces by Rocca and Lava; well-constructed Stock,hausen & Walkman-styled sample collages with a great sense of fun and a knockabout, quick-moving approach. Both are very enjoyable, and one hopes that their "work in progress" will come to fruition soon.

Tony Gage, ex-Radioactive Sparrow member, offers a 4-track slab of guitar overdubs sounding somewhere between Caspar Brotzmann and LEGO. Then, just to keep us on our toes, he comes back later with a cheesy MIDI thing which sounds like the theme music to something like skiing coverage on some no-budget cable channel. Every now and again, it distinguishes itself from Rick Wakemanesque horrors to dissolve into something altogether weirder, or to jerk itself into the next section without finishing what it was doing; a kind of lo-tech Mu-Ziq, perhaps.

Fellow ex-Sparrow Richard Bowers has something quite different to say, as one can tell immediately from the title of his "Of Landscapes". It's a drifting, ten-minute isolationist piece which is very effective, evoking contemporary Scandinavian composers, or more ambient electronicists like zoviet*france. It really is rather convincing, and it would be nice to hear a whole disc of this stuff. We also get a band called Simply Keys, who do something weirdly scary with distortion on, it seems, everything; promising, but one would need to hear more to know whether they live up to it.

Unsound Automatic are mining an unusual vein, searching for ignored, despised music, the music of amateur rock bands, bedroom knob-twiddlers with cheapo equipment, lo-fi tape recordings, the music of people oblivious to music theory and indifferent to the demand to build technique, to develop one's musicianship. Unsound Automatic seems to place a lot of trust in the thesis that just because someone doesn't have the gear, the haircut and the chops of a pretentious studio musician doesn't mean they lack the musical imagination. It's pretty obvious that this is going to fail sometimes, but what's nice about this compilation is how often it succeeds.

Richard Cochrane

Various Artists: The Kakutopia Annual Report

([Unsound Automatic](#): UACD015)

Homo-Genetic Arsonist: The Proverbial Flaming Domicile

([Unsound Automatic](#): UACD014)

Mig Harries (vocals, guitar, drums), Peredur Gwladus (bass), Manwell Greig (keyboards), Dafydd Harries (keyboards), Rick Dragger (drums, vocals)

Master Class: Mindgarden

([Unsound Automatic](#): UACD009)

Derrug Claptona (guitar, vocals), Fred Bansen (keyboards, vocals), Bo "Porn" Craddock (drums), Baru Harrison (bass), Dawn craddock (keyboards)

Those bonkers boys from Kakutopia (aka Unsound Automatic) are back again, with what promise to be the last two proper album releases on the label and the second of their "annual reports", compilations which they intend to continue releasing however nicely we ask them not to.

Actually, it's hard -- but important -- not to treat these guys as a comedy outfit. Much of this material is silly, yes, and some of it is very funny. Take Gwilly Edmondez -- almost certainly a Welsh-Hispanic alias of Will Edmondes -- performing his touching "Plugs (for Emma)". One imagines him sitting on a bar stool with a tight spotlight and a guitar on his lap, the sensitive singer-songwriter about to perform a favourite ballad. Except that the playing is all pinging, off-key wrongness and the vocals consist entirely of burps.

Yet elsewhere on what can only be described as a very healthy annual report which is bound to please the shareholders, there are some really cool tracks which transcend plain (but to-be-encouraged) silliness. "Serious" electronic composer Richard Bowers, whose [Nocturne](#) received plaudits from (musings) last year, appears here again with the excellent "Succubus"[\[note\]](#), which packs a lot of music into eight and a half minutes and sounds much like an electronically-manipulated Ligeti. He also appears as producer of the pleasingly in-your-face SAAB

Under the banner of Kak (from "cack", meaning crap, rubbish) the group appears to have attracted some really cool bedroom fastracker music makers. Abel Aabab puts forward the extremely cool "Notte Santa", a track which David Shea would be proud of. Gwilly Edmondez returns with the brilliantly-named "Helen & Wendy -- Two Women", which turns out to be a nice (but too short) piece of swirling electronica. The guys at The Wire go wild over this sort of stuff. Tony Gage is obviously a clever composer who plays deliberately stupid (actually, it seems they all are), and "Frank's Breakfast" is a nice juxtaposition of "proper" atmospheric piano playing, cruddy guitar noodles and some dialogue from a 1950s movie.

Meanwhile, the traditional face of Kak, with its cruddy mum's-garage guitar dins and silly lyrics, can still be seen about the place. Tony Gage fuses his synth stylings (yes, "stylings") with some kak rock to pretty cool effects, while the aptly-named Slowband lazily rumble through some Beefheart territory. Surviv use tinny drum machines to approximate a sort of Skinny Puppy goth-techno which you can make at home for less than your giro money. Pukus (another good name) have a cool Hendrixian guitarist but only one little condenser mike, resulting in a nasty bootleg-quality recording, although the track is called "Hur Spittle", which is some compensation.

Psychedelic Spazstic Hamster's "Die Motherfucker" would sound very much like a candidate for kak. Instead, however, it provides four minutes of pure genius. It's a towering piece of trip-hop ranting filtered through school rock band sounds and re-fried in the "studio" (ie someone's bedroom) into a menacing but nigh-on dancable slab of, well, funk.

As for the album releases, Master Class sound very much like Radioactive Sparrow, and unless they actually are Radioactive Sparrow with different names ("Derrug Claptona"? We don't think so) then this is -- and how can one put this without it sounding hugely unlikely? -- they're very much derivative of the Rads. "Beautiful Noise -- Experimental Band" may be a good gag reminiscent of King Missile's less Kak "Sensitive Artist", but if they'd been around at the time they'd have been picked for the role of the band who live below the protagonist of "Driller Killer", making his subsequent killing spree all the more psychologically believable. But go and see them live, if they ever come your way, because their gigs are probably a riot.

Homo-Genetic Arsonist's second CD wins the controversial (muusings) Album Title of the Millennium award, and there's as much to enjoy here as on ["Fuck Theory"](#), his first release. It starts well, with Harries singing with a mouthful of water (or something), and it just stays on pretty much that level throughout. It's all a bit less edgy

than the first album, but Harries isn't setting himself up as a joke for adults to laugh at (for those who don't know, he's a schoolboy). His intentions seem quite serious, although he has a far more mature sense of what that means than the self-indulgent bands people like this writer were involved with at that age. The packaging of these releases has improved, too, and this is an object you'll be proud to own, in contrast with his previous release which was horribly (but appropriately) ugly.

If you only buy one rubbish record this year, make it Kakutopia's annual report. It's not "so bad it's good", but good despite having all the odds against it. Maybe they intended to make it crap and got it wrong. Maybe. One suspects not. In a nutshell, they've created a unique missive from a musical hinterland nobody seems to care about.

"Succubus" uses recorders as a primary sound-source; Martin Archer's most recent release, "Winter Pilgrim Arriving", also features recorders. And before hearing about either of these projects, this writer started working with recorders too. What was in the water around the middle of last year?

Richard Cochrane

Various Artists: Bowed and Popped

([Nur Nicht Nur](#): no number)

Michael Vorfeld, Stephan Froleys, Hans Tammen (compositions/performances)

Various Artists: Rubbed and Blown

([Nur Nicht Nur](#): no number)

Claus von Bebber, RoN Schmidt, Paul Hubweber (compositions/performances)

These two disks seem -- and the details aren't too clear, what with the elusive packaging and my half-remembered high-school German -- to compile works by young composer/performers working at various different edges of avant garde new music. These packages really do celebrate a triumph of design over content: desirable metal boxes containing two or three gnomonic cards and a CD attached by a rubber nipple.

Michael Vorfeld's card contains a series of diagrams of percussion instruments in three numbered columns, with three lines of numbers tacked on the bottom; it seems to be the score for the piece which opens "Bowed and Popped". "x+x+x" certainly sounds like a percussion trio, so perhaps that's what it is; presumably it's performed by Vorfeld using overdubs, which is significant because, if the insert represents the score (it might not) then the piece is basically an improvisation in which the instrument to be used is the only composed parameter. Obviously influenced by electroacoustics as much as by the Stockhausen school of rhythmic and textural complexity pursued to the fullest extent, the result is a very listenable, constantly-changing performance which sounds familiar enough for new music fans to find it unthreatening but has enough surprises up its sleeve to keep it interesting.

It does, though, feel rather like the hors d'oeuvre to Stephan Froleys half-hour examination of mercuriality, "Hispeedo". Witty and light-hearted, it takes fast but apparently simple percussion ideas and works them into compelling musical textures, the likes of which this writer has never quite heard before. His techniques owe a great deal to Steve Reich's love of allowing loops to move in and out of phase with one another, but here it's put to rather different uses. The eight sections are like the panels of a minimalist frieze -- all the similar, yet all unique, eight views of the same ideal object. Although focussed on a single concept in a way that isn't very fashionable these days, this is an extremely effective piece, and it benefits by being clean, precise and deliberate. It would have been disastrous had Froleys tried to do several things at once here, but because he doesn't it's something of a must-hear composition.

The final piece on "Bowed and Popped" is by Hans Tammen, better known as a relentlessly inventive guitarist but here found playing... styrofoam. The piece is simply called "Styrofoam", lasts a little over twenty minutes and is broken into four sections; on the first and fourth he uses a bow, on the second he seems to "pop" the styrofoam with his fingers and the second involves god knows what. It all sounds just as you'd expect; squeaky, unsophisticated and rather silly. Nothing wrong with that, of course. It can also set your teeth on edge, and in fact if it doesn't you may be only half-human. This strange collision of a friendly material with a sometimes rather horrible sound is interesting enough, and Tammen's overdubbed textures are sufficiently imaginative, that there's something of real merit here. When the horsehair really is biting into those big which chunks of packaging, though, one does sometimes wish he'd go back to his guitar. Which he can make sound like someone bowing styrofoam, of course.

If those were three wildly dissimilar things to cram onto one CD, there are some more on its companion release, the saucy-sounding "Rubbed and Blown". Van Bepper and the mysteriously overcapitalised RoN Schmidt spend quarter of an hour doing five completely disjointed things -- a parody of high-energy free jazz, isolationist noises, a piece composed mostly from the sounds of pages turning and so on -- before launching into the last movement of their contribution, "50/50". This turns out to be a barrage of droning, barely-changing synthesiser sounds decorated with a sprinkling of ugly samples. It's pretty much impossible to make any sense out of this piece except as a sonic analogue of those vitrines found in conceptual art exhibitions containing, say, a broken doll, a spoon, a disassembled watch and a crisp packet. We are presumably intended to allow our imaginations to form connections between these juxtaposed, but otherwise unrelated, elements. Whether or not it works is largely a matter of taste, and of the frame of mind with which you approach it. From a technical point of view, it's a well-constructed piece and there's certainly plenty to think about here.

Partnering this peculiar composition are three from Paul Hubweber. "Zellen" takes small cells of notes and gives them to what sounds like an ensemble of brass instruments, who play them quickly in continuous improvised lines. The notes shift and change slowly, but the overall effect is of a dense slab of sound whose characteristics gradually metamorphose. About two-thirds of the way in, some processing becomes evident, further cementing these individual lines into a single whole to form a very effective piece. "1996" also begins

with "brass" sounds -- although this time the instruments sound home-made -- with deliberately clumsy studio edits. These eventually give way to other "junk" sounds, co-existing in a virtual ambiance of industrial noises. There's nothing terribly unfamiliar here, but it's effectively done, although the abrupt ending sounds decidedly odd. "Ab+Auf" is a far more minimal affair which, like "Zellen", is performed by a live ensemble. Hubweber's idiosyncratic writing style really comes to the fore in this, the longest and most accessible of his pieces on this disc, and the combinations of slowly sweeping drones with filligree soloistic gestures make this the album's essential cut.

These are two discs crammed with music which, for the most part, is quite unlike anything you're likely to hear elsewhere. It's exciting new work and, in common with much of what Nur Nicht Nur puts out, it's outsider stuff which doesn't fit into the academy, the theatre or the improv clubs. Those with an interest in new music should pick these up without hesitation: both have high points, and while it's tempting to recommend "Bowed and Popped" on the basis that Forley's piece is a long one, it would be wrong to neglect its companion, with Hubweber's wonderful "Ab + Auf". Difficult listening which repays the efforts it demands.

Richard Cochrane

Various Artists: Bowed and Popped

([Nur Nicht Nur](#): no number)

Michael Vorfeld, Stephan Froleys, Hans Tammen (compositions/performances)

Various Artists: Rubbed and Blown

([Nur Nicht Nur](#): no number)

Claus von Bebber, RoN Schmidt, Paul Hubweber (compositions/performances)

These two disks seem -- and the details aren't too clear, what with the elusive packaging and my half-remembered high-school German -- to compile works by young composer/performers working at various different edges of avant garde new music. These packages really do celebrate a triumph of design over content: desirable metal boxes containing two or three gnomic cards and a CD attached by a rubber nipple.

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Richard Cochrane

Various Artists: Boston Underbelly

([Sublingual](#): SLR001)

Andrew Neumann, Saturnalia, Neptune, Mile Wide, Sigmoid Flexure, BTM/KOF, BTM/Orgy of Noise, Binary System, Thurston Moore.

Well, you get your money's worth, that's for sure; 73 minutes, 21 tracks, 9 artists/bands from the underbelly of Boston's music scene(s). The first thing to note, in fact, is that this isn't a survey of Boston *experimental* music per se; many of these folks have come from, and continue to inhabit, the rock circuit more than anything which Londoners might recognise as a "free improv" scene or New Yorkers as "downtown". [Neumann](#) and [Saturnalia](#) released CDs simultaneously with this one, also on Sublingual, which are also reviewed on (musings), so we won't mention them here except to say that, generously enough, what's here doesn't duplicate anything on those releases except for two edited versions of longer tracks.

Neumann and Saturnalia are most heavily represented on this compilation, with four and five tracks respectively; Neptune and Mile Wide weigh in with the next largest contributions of three songs each. Neptune create jangling rock from simulacra of conventional instruments welded out of scrap metal, and while the results are predictably tinny and detuned they're also surprisingly conventional. Thumping, bluesy riffs predominate, creating something between college-boy grunge and pub blues. Perfectly listenable, but nothing like as outre as they look on paper.

Mile Wide, on the other hand, don't look terribly experimental anyway; a folk-rock band with cheesy progressive lyrics who would sound like early Genesis if it weren't for Saturnalia regular Vic Rawlings' unhinged ethno-forgeries on banjo and sarangi. Probably a lot of fun live, both Mile Wide and Neptune do something "alternative" rather than avant garde, although they certainly do it rather well.

Bill T Miller, whose sampladelia so livened up Saturnalia's self-titled debut, is a very different kettle of fish. He appears on three tracks here, once with Kings of Feedback and twice with Orgy of Noise. Kings of Feedback are again coming from the rock camp, but with an awareness of electronic music which gives them an edge. "Whispers" is a nice collage of pulsing industrialism, rock textures and spoken/whispered voices; very effective. "Orgy of Noise" are, if anything, even better, sounding like a live version of Ground Zero's "Revolutionary Pekinese Opera"; wildly aggressive, jump-cutting every few seconds, they produce a spikey, alienating din which is, in the small doses presented here, hugely enjoyable. One hopes that Miller will be doing more with Sublingual in the near future.

There are also a handful of single tracks here which are worthy of attention. "Moulty's Hand", though it sounds like an obscure Irish jig, is in fact a patently not-entirely-improvised song by Sigmoid Flexure, who apparently specialise in "loud free improv". Well, there are certainly composed sections here, but Emily Weber's Zornesque tenor (yes, complete with the ultra-high-pitched squeals JZ himself employs the more amenable alto for) keeps the pressure on and gives some sections a Painkiller feel. There's more restlessness here, as with Orgy of Noise, a nice sense that an eight-minute improvisation needn't do any of the expected things. It's a lot of fun, although the constant returns to the not-awfully-interesting 6/8 riff do sometimes chafe a little.

The Binary System, on the other hand, look like a classic free improv duo of prepared piano and drums. We'd be on home turf here, were this not "Boston Underground". As it is, there are none of the skittering freeform shapes which we've grown accustomed to in this part of the world; no, these are players, again, with rock and even dance music sensibilities rather than traditional free jazz chops. Their playing is dark, rhythmic and sometimes repetitive, Roger Miller attacking his piano interior with ceaseless inventiveness while Larry Dersch unhurriedly rolls out the beats with a set of mallets. One of the highlights of this compilation, and let's hope there's an album in the pipeline.

The final track here is the one they would have trailed it with if Sublingual were interested in grabbing as big a slice of the market as possible at whatever expense. Well, they were right not to, because although Thurston Moore's is a big name, it's quite right that the focus should be on the lesser-knowns for whom this is a more crucial release. Here he does -- for just two minutes -- pretty much what he's known for, producing a multi-tracked squall of guitar noise comparable with Caspar Brotzmann.

It's a good example of the genre, but don't buy the CD for it. Buy it for Neumann and Saturnalia, Sigmoid Flexure and Bill T Miller and the outstanding Binary System. That's a lot of interesting, unusual and stimulating music for your money, and the remaining tracks are unremarkable, but not at all bad. Particularly if you like experimental rock, this disc offers an excellent insight into a scene producing its own kind of alternative music.

The Vertrek Ensemble with Derek Bailey: Departures

([Volatile](#): VCD002)

Derek Bailey (guitar), Vadim Budman (guitar, cornet, reed cornet), Ron de Jong (percussion)

The Vertrek Ensemble with Eugene Chadbourne: Dim Sum, Dodgers and Dangerous Nights

([Volatile](#): VCD003)

Eugene Chadbourne (guitar, banjo, voice), Vadim Budman (guitar, cornet, reed cornet, wooden flute, harmonica), Ron de Jong (percussion)

It's daring enough for a little-known guitar/drums duo to release a record with one of the most innovative living guitarists, but to do so twice is downright foolhardy. Only the most confident or the thickest-skinned of axemen would invite comparison with both Bailey and Chadbourne so openly (such comparisons, anyway, usually irritate the musician in question, either that or simply bore them).

Actually, the more intriguing comparison suggested by these releases is of Bailey with Chadbourne. The reason for this is that Budman and de Jong display rather respectful attitudes towards their guests, and there's no jostling to be heard. These sessions are very much the guests', with the Vertrek Ensemble providing an element of continuity between them.

Accordingly, the disc with Bailey is by far the more serious-minded of the two. For some reason there is only one trio track here, the remainder being given over to duets between Bailey and one of the Vertreks. However they hit upon the idea, it works well, giving Bailey an ever-changing set of challenges to keep him -- and us -- stimulated.

The guitarist himself must have been in a particularly abstract frame of mind for this session, no doubt inspired by his collaborators, who favour a very sparse, percussive music. There's evidence that de Jong has strong chops, but for the most part he's a maker of atmospheres and textures, or a punctuator -- happily reminiscent, in fact, of John Stevens. "The Steeples of His City Clanked and Sprang" is a high point here, with the percussionist employing what sounds like a home-made xylophone to accompany a Bailey improvisation which starts by stalking around a single chord and heads out from there.

Budman himself owes less of a debt to Bailey than to Chadbourne, their guest on the second CD. His connections with tonal playing are much closer to the surface. He does, however, play with considerable logic, something Chadbourne often (joyously) lacks but Bailey is very strong in. He shines on the Vertrek's duo spot on the Bailey disk.

The Chadbourne disk breaks things up differently from "Departures". Here are four (mostly very long) tracks: one a guitar duet, one a sentimental ballad, the others rambling post-country improvisations. The tenor -- as it has been with most of Chadbourne's recent work -- is unflinchingly angular, noisy and often rather grating. You either like that kind of pace or you don't, but if you do then there's plenty to enjoy here.

The guitar duet sees the two drawing sparks from each other in a very lumpy, rhythmic idiom which is rich with ideas which justify the length of the thing, something its structure (or lack of it) couldn't do. This is abrasive guitar duelling (the title is "I Challenge You To An Epiphone Duo") with a rather friendly, intimate kind of competitiveness about it, making it very likable.

The sentimental ballad -- "My Mother's Eyes" -- is altogether stranger. Of course, we're used to Dr Chadbourne's ambiguous deconstruction of this sort of thing, but if you're expecting simple-minded camping around, a sort of musical slumming with the inbred mountain cretins, you're in for a surprise. The piece contains some heartfelt, expressive guitar playing and candid (if characteristically off-key) singing. It's weirdly contextualised by the fact that Chadbourne dedicates it to his own mother, making the following correction to a comment about her in the concert programme:

It says she was a refugee from the Nazi death camps. She was a refugee from Nazi Germany, but not the death camp. I don't think there were refugees from the death camps.

Which intro sheds a rather different light on what follows than the usual interpretation of Chadbourne as a cynical, detached postmodernist. This music runs deep in his own aesthetic, and he takes it seriously in a way which can startle the supposedly high-brow avant fraternity.

Anyway, said fraternity will have no problems with the remaining two tracks. "If I Were A Bell" strips a c-list standard to its bare essentials and rattles around with it for six minutes before making a remarkable change of

pace and spending the next half hour in an extremely abstract three-way jam. The Vertreks shift between instruments over its course, and this adds to an unexpected continuity with the AACM school of free music. It's like being told a long, rambling story without any real structure, but with plenty of incident along the way. "Death Lives Down In That Bayou" works similarly.

The music here is pure Chadbourne, and it's a tribute to Budman and de Jong that they work with him with such sensitivity. At times dramatic, even melodramatic, it's pure Southern Gothic, scary and funny and rather perverse. Both disks are well worth tracking down, and the arrival of [Volatile Records](#) is to be welcomed.

Richard Cochrane

VHF: Extracts

([Erstwhile](#): 001)

Graham Halliwell (alto sax, percussion), Simon H Fell (double bass), Simon Vincent (drums, tone generator)

Simon H Fell has rarely been far from his own rather individual cutting edge, working with improvisation but also fascinated by electronic music and the possibilities offered by the studio. When last year he released [Nine Points in Ascent](#), a duet album of free improvisations by himself and Graham Halliwell, he launched the saxophonist as a serious voice on the UK scene (such that it is -- outside London, there are too many fine players struggling with one or two venues and half a dozen like-minded peers). The album was a brilliant celebration of free improv; purely acoustic, no studio trickery, just two unique voices engaged in the kind of slippery dialogue no-one had heard bass and saxophone enter into since Parker and Guy. And now, as members of VHF, they've reinvented the whole thing again.

This writer must confess to having expected (rather eagerly) a similar session to last year's model, with the addition of some drums. Well, that's not what's happened at all. Although Halliwell and Fell are just as recognisable as ever, the addition of Vincent has created a trio the likes of which really hasn't been seen before. Where the chief virtue of *Nine Points* was its speed and agility, *Extracts* moves with almost geological slowness, pushing at some almost-immovable object in its path.

It would be easy to get impressionistic about this record, and talk about oppressive darkness, heaviness of atmosphere, the horror-movie sounds of clanking chains, closing doors and malevolent noises in a rather reverberating ambience. The cover artwork, with its dimly-lit close-ups of stone textures, doesn't help make this record seem more friendly, and nor do the track titles: "Xe", "Ra", "Tr" and another four symbols for chemical elements. Yes, you could certainly have a field day with it all if it weren't for the music, which just keeps on insisting that you sit up and pay attention.

Put simply, the pieces here are of average length, episodic and mostly at a very low dynamic. The musicians concentrate on constructing compelling textures, and there are periods in each piece where only one or two of them are playing; the emphasis seems to be on musical narrative, if one may call it that, as opposed to melodic or even timbral elaboration. Fell and Halliwell play something quite different from anything we have heard from either of them before, while Vincent favours cymbals (often rubbed or coaxed gently with soft beaters) and his electronics subtly join an ensemble sound which is already very close to electroacoustics.

That's putting it in a nutshell, of course; not something one wants to do with something that's quite as enigmatic as this. For a start, those seven symbols from the periodic table represent, let's see, Xenon, Radium... "Tr"? "Tr" doesn't appear on the periodic table, and nor do "Ct", "Xt" or "Ts", however plausible they look. Unless these are recent discoveries, someone is pulling someone else's leg here. And the final track, recorded live, bursts briefly into a louder, more familiar kind of free improv before, too suddenly, it's all over.

This is a sphynx-like piece of work which is quite unlike anything else around: seven slowly-unfolding stories without characters or settings, without descriptions or dialogue, which will have you glued to your speakers although you may not quite be able to explain why. Part of the reason is that all three are capable of fine musicianship, when it comes down to it. Very often, however, it's not the monologue of one musician and his instrument which holds the attention but the way the group moves together, by virtue of some hidden, alien logic, from one lapidary idea to another.

Richard Cochrane

Vitriol: Randonee 0.06

([Sir Records](#): SIRR2001MCD)

Paolo Raposo, Carlos Santos (composition)

Much as they may sound like a lippy punk band, Vitriol in fact make atmospheric, even sometimes ambient electronic music. This EP presents three pieces, plus two short extras. The music is well-realised, very abstract but ultimately tied closely to the traditions of environmental recordings and sound design.

That's not to say that these are more mood pieces than musical artefacts, however. Far from attempting to create acousmatic background sounds, Raposo and Santos approach what they do with a definite sense of musical drama, slowly dripping sounds into big, reverberating atmospheres.

The main piece here is the eight-minute title track, which throbs with that familiar engine-room ambiance. This particular room, however, is inhabited by a selection of unnerving sounds, the sounds of skittish half-glimpsed things, part insect and part static eletricity, and the sonar pings which one can imagine seeking them out.

Of course, this sound-world will be familiar to many listeners, but it's all too easy to go from this to a value judgement. The sound-world of most jazz records is just as "hackneyed"; the fact is, it's what you do with it that counts, and Vitriol make very involving music with these materials. God knows it's easy to employ the same things to tedious ends.

The other two pieces of reasonable length (both around four and a half minutes) explore similar areas.

"Durriyyatun" is a good companion piece to the title track, subtler, more slow-moving and in this writer's opinion the best track here. "Ropica Pnefma", as its name sort of implies, brings some of the rainforest into Vitriol's very digital world, but it's the grain and pace of the sounds they're interested in, not their imitation.

This is a strong release from Vitriol. Mercifully parsimonious (this kind of music can be hard to digest over an hour or more on CD), it presents a concentrated view of their musical style and leaves one wanting to hear more.

Richard Cochrane

Berger/Blackwell: Just Play

([Emanem](#): 4037)

Karl Berger (vibes, balafon, darbuka), Edward Blackwell (drums)

Ed Ware's Tree

(Ed Ware: 4037)

Joe Fiedler (trombone), Jerome Harris (guitar), Pete McCann (guitar), Edward Ware (drums)

Just Play offers a truly delicious opportunity to relish seven duets by two legendary percussionists, recorded one spring night in New York State in 1976. These improvisations pair xylophones with membranophones to create throbbing rivers of sound which seem, like the West African music which inspired both men, to spin on forever. It's as if the performers simply open a window at the beginning of each piece and close it at the end, such is the sense of movement around a still point in these hypnotic performances.

As ever, Blackwell has impeccable swing, but what's really striking here is the funkiness of the playing, the way the accent always lands squarely on what might or might not be the "one", a firm rhythmic base in this mainly metreless music. The CD suggests "File under: New Music/Free Jazz", but this sounds unlike any kind of free jazz you might usually think of. Relaxed, swinging and bouncing, it's a jam session from heaven, in audibly intimate surroundings. It was issued on vinyl in 1978 by a company called Quark, and it's good to see it available again, and in such a reliable catalogue. Emanem are, after all, best known for their issues of music by British improvisors, especially John Stevens. This is a world away, but there are (tenuous) commonalities, and one hopes it will remain long in the catalogue.

To compare such a recording with that just released by Ed Ware on his own label would be fatuous and, anyway, it wouldn't tell us much, but there's a certain similarity of ethos which makes this writer imagine himself often wanting to hear the other of these records after hearing either one. There's a similarly laid-back quality and sense of the rhythms rolling out in their own good time.

One suspects that Ware owes much to Blackwell, in fact, and his funky syncopations, cut with African riffs and polyrhythms, strongly call the master to mind. The compositions here -- for so there are, making these extremely different pieces structurally from those played by Blackwell and Berger -- are mainly simple, and best when they are. "Reflections" is an example of a piece with too much on the charts; these guys aren't Very Very Circus and oughtn't to forget it. Still, though, the majority of the pieces here are sketches filled in in real time with verve and good humour.

The unusual line-up tends to highlight the guitarists rather than Fiedler, surprisingly enough, despite the fact that the two string players appear together only once and otherwise share out the tracks. Neither is particularly exciting here, but both are okay as long as they steer clear of the distortion pedal which, as is its wont, does sometimes make things go a little pear-shaped. Still, Harris has some nice moves and McCann knows how to string a solo together. Fiedler's infrequent solos, on the other hand, are well worth listening for.

Overall, however, it's not the individual contributions which stay with you. The trio sound is most important, and above all the pulsing rhythm maintained by Ware, who's mixed somewhat louder than a drummer usually would be, and to good purpose.

Richard Cochrane

John Wall: Fractuur

(Utterpsalm: CD3)

John Wall (analogue synthesizer, piano, sampler), John Edwards (double bass), Peter Shepperd (violin), David Fitzgerald (cello), Guy Cowley (clarinet), Philip Shepperd (cello), Jorg Widman (bass clarinet)

I hesitate to tell you this but, despite appearances from the line-up, this is a suite of sampler-based compositions. I hesitate because one of the wonderful things about listening to this disk is its *trompe l'oreille* synthesis of such organic music that one can hardly believe it is not being performed in real time. Which is not to say, of course, that improvisation gives one access to some ineffable something from which composition is always excluded -- this recording is proof that such ideas are nonsense. It's just that avant garde electronic composition can often feel stilted, even awkward, in a way that improvisation much less often does.

Describing how the music sounds is more tricky. To create it, Wall has used samples from recordings by some 34 different musicians, composers or groups, including modernists, free improvisers, minimalists and out-rock outfits. The pieces here can sound like any and all of these things at once, although the latter pair of genres much less so than the former on all but one track, "Distil", a study in dissonant ostinato figures punctuated occasionally by a drum-machine snare/bass drum combination reminiscent of industrial music. Wall has also extensively sampled the credited musicians and used their own playing to give shape to his compositions -- a contributing factor, surely, to the fine logicity of the whole thing, particularly given the involvement of the hugely talented John Edwards.

Perhaps one comparison might be very superior film music, in the use of post-war classical figurations, but also in the music's tendency to set up an idea, pursue it for a relatively short time and then cut to something else. The ideas are not episodic, but the superficial mood shifts, sometimes quite radically, at fairly regular intervals. Neither jump-cuts nor fumbles, these changes represent a genuinely filmic imagination, a series of different scenes through which a single narrative is threaded.

In this way, Wall can have his cake and eat it; there are sections which would be impossible in group improvisation, but the stale one-man-and-his-cursor feel of some electronica is leavened by more than just a few sampled licks. I have the impression, for example, that whole chunks of John Edwards' thought processes have given shape to these works as much as have Wall's own considerable talents. Like a desert cactus, this may be prickly and not conventionally pretty stuff, but for all that -- indeed, because of it -- it's genuinely beautiful.

Richard Cochrane

Mark Weber: Beautemous Everlasting

([Zerx](#): 004)

Mark Weber (spoken word, melodica, percussion), Patti Littlefield (voice), Tom Guralnick (tenor sax), Tim Zannes (tenor sax), Bill Plake (tenor sax), Stefan Dill (guitar), Lou Morales (percussion), Justine Flynn (French horn), Jon Baldwin (cornet, percussion), Jefferson Voorhees (percussion), Mark Weaver (tuba), J A Deane (trombone, steel guitar, electronics), Lisa Polisar (flute), Alicia Ultan (viola), Courtney Smith (celtic harp), Craig Ochikubo (keys), Anders Swanson (bass, violin), Chris Garcia (drums), Eileen Sullivan (violin), Bonnie Renfro (violin), Pam Morden (violin), Lewis Winn (guitar), Chris Allen (vibes).

Mark Weber: Time Zone Differential

([Zerx](#): 007)

Mark Weber (spoken word), Michael Vlatkovich (trombone, percussion), Bill Plake (tenor sax), Alex Cline (percussion), Nels Cline (guitar), William Roper (tuba, percussion), Chris Garcia (percussion), Vinny Golia (baritone sax, clarinet), David Parlato (bass), Craig Ochikubo (keys), Anders Swanson (bass, violin), Rob Blakeslee (trumpet, flugelhorn), Ken Filiano (bass), Billy Mintz (drums), Gerald Locklin (spoken word, one track only), Wayne Peet (organ, one track only), Gretchen Parlato (voice, one track only).

Mark Weber does "Poetry & Jazz", and if you're still reading this then you probably have a tendency to give rather freely of the benefit of the doubt. Yes, this is real, 1967, Haight-Ashbury JAZZ POETRY, pseudo-Ginsbergisms recoiling into either Romanticism or everyday chat, accompanied by growling tenor saxophones signifying New York, freedom and dangerous ideas.

There's a reason why you haven't heard of Weber as a writer. Actually, to be fair to him there are two reasons, the other being that poets find it extremely hard to get any kind of exposure even when they're extremely good. Well, Weber isn't particular, and doesn't really even pretend to be. He has two, simple techniques; a naive style which is almost an anti-style, and a symbolist process which lists fractured images in the way beloved of lovestruck undergraduates.

The first style is most prevalent on "Time Zone Differential", where the pieces often descend into a kind of naturalistic doggerel:

I've been on the pancakes lately
which is not a whole lot different from being on the wine
but I don't drink wine any more
I do pancakes [\[see note\]](#)

It's extremely hard to get plain writing like this right, and the results here are not it. Poetry is not just prose broken up into bits; William Carlos Williams, arguably the century's greatest poet and certainly the one responsible for the proliferation of this kind of thing, was able to create highly-wrought works of art from apparently simple materials, but he didn't do it by shoving them down on the page anyhow. "Time Zone Differential" seems pretty unlistenable as a result, but of course that's largely a matter of taste. Weber's voice is grainy and easy to listen to, and if you like your poetry down-home rather than cutting-edge then it isn't going to be too upsetting.

Perhaps it's just that; Weber is a sort of cuddly, meet-your-mum version of Charles Bukowski. Well, about 99 per cent of the attraction of Bukowski was that he didn't tell stories about his friend's cat or going to the laundrette, and if he had then they wouldn't have been so suitable for publication in the parish newsletter as most of these are. At the end of the day, most of what Weber has to say on "Time Zone Differential", in terms of actual content, isn't terribly interesting, and where other poets make mundane subject-matter interesting by virtue of poetic technique, Weber is too macho or too anti-intellectual for that sort of nonsense. Definitely one to get only if you know you like this sort of thing, especially since the words are so important and the music pretty much takes a back seat.

"Beautemous Everlasting", on the other hand, uses the fragmented technique, and is all the less irritating for it:

thunder sparked ocean
wave torrent
cascading tide, watery, iridescent
green, blue and orange sheen
quick ozone expanding circled wide
sun moon circled long

feline night and shadows
cucumbers dangling cliffside

It's hard to see that anyone would rush out and buy this for the poems themselves, which sound very much like something we all wrote some time or another, the difference being that we didn't show it to anyone because we knew it wasn't especially interesting. But they're hardly terrible crimes against the genre either, and where the words detract too strongly from "Time Zone Differential", "Beautemeous Everlasting" lets the music come through by using a lyrical style which often blends into the accompaniment.

The musicianship here is of a high standard, with some very nice individual contributions dotted throughout, but because the focus is on Weber it's an ensemble sound which makes the overall impression. Some of these arrangements are lovely, some very atmospheric, and Weber's skills as an arranger and composer clearly outstrip his verbal talents. It would be nice to hear an all-instrumental album in the future, because while his preference in poetry is going to alienate a lot of potential listeners, his jazzy soundtracks could reach a much larger audience. Weber is doing something you either like or you don't, and if you think you might fall into the former camp then don't listen to me but seek out the Zerx website for more info. In any event, "Beautemeous Everlasting" is probably the one to go for.

Richard Cochrane

Quotations transcribed from CD audio; no punctuation added, line breaks indicate reading style and do not necessarily correspond with the printed versions.

Weston/Edwards/Sanders: Mercury Concert

([Emanem](#) : 4028)

Veryan Weston (piano), John Edwards (bass), Mark Sanders (drums)

Edwards and Sanders are one of London's very best rhythm sections, and Veryan Weston one of its most criminally neglected pianists, so this disc is a pretty sure-fire winner before you even get the cellophane off. Anyone who has seen Weston live can testify to his intense concentration, that analytical stare he fixes on his keys or his playing partners as he hits the right notes time and again, or his abstracted, shut-eyed posture, like a chess player thinking two dozen moves ahead.

Weston has something of Borah Bergman about him -- that same cool musicality which manifests itself in apparently brutal outpourings of sound. He plays fast and loud -- especially on this disc, actually -- but never loose. He's as good as any pianist of his generation in this music, and the level of recognition he has outside London really isn't what it should be.

When Edwards and Sanders get together almost nothing can stop them. Sanders' fluidity is just astonishing, and his sense of where to place a beat and how to insinuate a rhythm without resorting to a regular pulse is very special indeed. Edwards, on the other hand, is an extremely flexible player, equally comfortable with rock, pop, funk, jazz and improv. He brings this to bear in his range of approaches -- no precious personal concept for him, just a pragmatic desire to do whatever the music needs moment to moment. Paradoxically, this gives him a fairly recognisable sound, as his woody pizzicato and over-rosined arco surface and dive in the midst of the storm.

All three are great listeners, which helps immensely, and as a group they can hit on ideas with near-simultaneity; they drift together, change course together and turn on a ha'penny when, it seems, no one of them really expects it. This is a really excellent piano trio, full of all the things which make the format continually challenging, and hence it's everything a piano trio ought to be.

Richard Cochrane

W.O.O. Revelator: Taking the Long View

([W.O.O. Direct](#): no number)

Bonnie Kane (sax, flute), Chris Forsyth (guitar), Ray Sage (drums)

This music will leave a nasty stain on your ears. It's New York, hardcore, no-shit punk jazz, loud and proud with sound quality somewhere between a bootleg and a wax cylinder. But there's a bit more to W.O.O. Revelator than another Borbetomagus-style noise project. That sort of material can be pretty wearisome -- we all know the drill, after all. Surrounded by a haze of words like "primal energy", "desire", "anti-music" and "id", three or four people make an interminable sound which is as free of conventional musical content as possible under the misapprehension that they're doing something "radical". You only need one Borbetomagus in the world, and the presence of so many wanna-bes is perplexing.

There's none of that cod-psychoanalytic bull for Bonnie Kane's W.O.O. Revelator, the trio incarnation of a collective which she has co-ordinated under the W.O.O. umbrella. This trio plays smart, spikey improvisations which take up the tradition of improvised rock from the likes of King Crimson and transports it into a punky region where energy and commitment matter more than technical facility. That doesn't make them noise-mongers, and each of the eight tracks here has its own identity because it pursues musical trains of thought rather than abandoning them the moment they emerge.

So, while one might well apply the word "punk" to this music -- and to the members, perhaps, who seem to have learned the lessons of the DIY ethic -- that shouldn't be confused with a lack of musical ability. Chris Forsyth's guitar slithers and crackles with ideas, and Kane may use simple techniques but she does so with pinpoint accuracy; Sage, meanwhile, can pound out Ramones-style four-beat rock when he wants to, but he can also work texturally or, again, push the flexible pulse associated with free jazz around the stage with apparent ease.

"Punk jazz" doesn't mean a compromise between jazz's traditional insistence on "chops" and punk's apparent lack of concern for technique; instead, it strips out the swing and coolness of jazz and weds it to the philosophical seriousness with which punk treats energy and commitment. You won't hear the same note-spinning here as you get in other sax-guitar-drums trios, but you will hear a stronger sense of ensemble playing and a greater interest in creating an interesting block of sound.

Although marred slightly by the recording quality (W.O.O. only ever record live, so this isn't going to get any better), this is an album of music which is more interesting than you expect it to be. Ray Sage's drum solo which opens "Interim Drivers" is full of restless fusion, pulling together the disparate elements of punk riffing (which he clearly knows inside-out) and jazz (which he obviously has a feel for, at least), and is followed by a classic Kane solo, skronking and turning weird angles. They're a group who are already very involving, and who must be great fun live, but who sound like they're pursuing a musical idea which is ever-evolving. That makes them a group to keep an eye on in the future.

Richard Cochrane

Aki Takase: Le Cahier du Bal

([Leo](#): CDLR319)

Aki Takase (piano)

Howard Riley Trio: Overground

([Emanem](#): 4054)

Howard Riley (piano), Barry Guy (bass), Tony Oxley (percussion, electronics)

Pandelis Karayorgis Trio: Blood Ballad

([Leo](#): CDLR325)

Pandelis Karayorgis (piano), Nate McBride (bass), Randy Peterson (drums)

Christine Wodrascka & Ramon Lopez: Aux Portes du Matin

([Leo](#): CDLR318)

Christine Wodrascka (piano), Ramon Lopez (drums)

Takase, Karayorgis and Wodrascka are all firm-handed pianists who take jazz seriously. The first two owe something to Monk -- who doesn't? -- but their languages are quite different despite some superficial similarities; Wodrascka is more distant from the jazz tradition, but this is still very much jazz music rather than something else. Riley is, of course, an established player with an international reputation; while comparisons with the younger players are unfair, there's clearly some common ground here among them all.

Takase is all over the keyboard; she has more Cecil Taylor in her playing than first appears. There are none of the great galloping chromatic runs which pianists employ so liberally these days, however, and it's the older man's sense of jazz harmony which seems to have made an impact on Takase.

The fifteen improvisations here are freewheeling and rather wild for the most part, but the complete confidence of touch which powers them along is wedded to a cunning thematic approach to developing material and one never feels that the music is slipping away from her.

There's a lot of functional harmony here, and much more exposed than you'd usually find in Taylor's playing. "Tango de Anzu", an exquisite exercise in dramatic staccato, even moves through a succession of tonal centres. But it's never reduced to changes or lazy cadences; Takase does a continuous high-wire act and never falls into the safety net. This is hugely impressive stuff, and we had better hear more from Takase in the future; she must have a mind like a bacon-slicer to play such intelligent, structured music on the fly. Unconditionally recommended.

Pandelis Karayorgis is a no less smart player. His clever uses of dissonance impressed in [Heart and Sack](#) and continue to do so here. Inspired by the Strayhorn/Ellington book, and covering a Coltrane tune, he's in even more mainstream jazz territory here than he was on his previous release, and this is music which many who find most of Leo's catalogue a little intimidating will be able to get along with grandly.

That's certainly not to say it's a lightweight set, however. Karayorgis is a pianist not to be underestimated; his fractured, Monk-like logic is absolutely right and the uneasy conjunction of rather sentimental hard bop with jagged angles is constantly arresting. He seems to think his way through each solo, making weird but valid deductions from the basic harmonic scheme. Indeed, the extent of such a scheme or the degree of composition is not clear, because the trio's playing is sure-footed but oblique throughout.

As for McBride and Peterson, they mainly hold back and provide support for the pianist -- a welcome improvement over the loud "Heart and Sack" set, which sounds ragged by comparison. Both are consummately tasteful, and although their contributions are essential they're appropriately understated. The focus here is on Karayorgis, and anyone who enjoys jazz piano would be wise to hear what he has to say.

Christine Wodrascka is far more "abstract" than Takase or Karayorgis; she's also the youngest and least well-known. Like Takase, her modus operandi is thematic development, but here the themes are deceptively simple blocks of sound, and she's as interested in their rhythmic as harmonic characteristics.

her duet with Lopez is dynamic and chromatic, impetuous and, in one sense anyway, not terribly subtle. But Wodrascka's music isn't about subtlety, or not really anyway, and her rhythmic dynamism is what keeps you listening to these very involving performances. She's at her best when tackling her rugged lumps of material -- big dissonant chords which tremble and hammer under her fingers -- rather than quietly ruminating on the strings (as she does on one piece) or preparing the instrument. This latter is quite a mess, although an undoubtedly enjoyable one as objects ping off the strings and bounce around. That seems to be a big part of

her aesthetic, and one imagines that Lopez, who likes this sort of thing, is having a ball.

Still, there's a definite jazziness at the heart of this music. Lopez, although far from a traditional free bop man, plays with a lazy swing for a gopod portion of this music, something over which both his and his partner's big, dramatic gestures can sit. The pair work together beautifully, and although the music here is somewhat mixed the high points are very, very impressive.

British veteran Howard Riley has things in common with all of these players -- Takase's thematic cunning, Karayorgis's obliquity, Wodrascka's thunder -- but, of course, in a rather different package. Riley is, unlike any of these three, entirely divorced from functional harmony, and his approach to rhythm is, as the cliché has it, angular. Actually, the cliché has something to recommend it; Riley really does sound as if he's navigating absurdly frequent hairpin bends at the keyboard, and hardly has he begun to state an idea, it seems, then he's driven it with what appears to be wild abandon in the opposite direction.

It's a pleasure to hear Riley in good company, and we're fortunate that his taste in musicians has always been pretty good. Rarely have such heights as these been obtained, however; the trio with Oxley and Guy sounds like it's going to be pure perfection, and it is. The bassist is infinitely flexible, and here his arco sings, growls, grizzles, punctuates and percusses, always in synch with Riley and often pushing him, with a split-second manoeuvre, into one of those handbrake-turns which so characterise this music. The bassist in a piano trio can sometimes feel like a spare wheel, but never here; Guy is proactive, Riley is constantly interested, and both listen with enviable acuity.

Oxley's musicianship is, like that of the other two, legendary. He's just the sort of thing Riley needs, a player, like Guy, which is unintimidated and full of ideas. His main mode is a very busy rush of sound, but within that is a forest of detail. He has plenty more percussive techniques than this, of course, but the music here being often blustering and highly energetic, this approach is often in evidence.

Oxley also uses electronics here to augment the trio sound. Sometimes this approach can be pretty nasty, as irrelevant bleeps and squarks leap out of an otherwise acoustic setting. Oxley, however, is cleverer than this, and the sounds he employs are close to the sounds of the trio, so that even a close listen can have you mystified as to which instrument you're hearing, especially as all three use amplification and stomp-box effects from time to time. There's absolutely nothing intrusive about any of this, and the Oxley-Riley duet "Pages", where the electronics are at their most obvious, sounds remarkably like the trio usually does, with the extended techniques which are widely in evidence augmented by electronics. The piece, and the remainder of the music here, is utterly absorbing and ravishingly lovely. Recommended without hesitation.

Richard Cochrane

THE KEITH YAUN QUINTET -- Countersink

(Leo Lab: CD047)

Keith Yaun (guitar), Mat Maneri (electric violin), Nathan Cook (tenor sax), John Lockwood (bass), Johnny McLellan (drums)

He has a pretty standard bebop sound marred, now and again, by imperfect technique, but considerably enhanced by a strong imagination. His solos are flowing affairs, sometimes dissonant but always within the world of bop harmony. An album like this one, then, might seem an odd place to find a player like Keith Yaun. Yes, this is themes-and-solos stuff, but its feel is much more fluid, and particularly more open to group interaction, than the work of the neo-hard-bop brigade.

Lockwood is, of course, a known quantity, providing rock-solid, muscular accompaniment. McLellan is perhaps less of a name, but his flexible approach is proactive enough to cope with this rather open-ended music. At their best -- which is most of the time -- these two provide a precarious, anything-could-happen framework which seems to hover in the air, about to spring into action, like a goalkeeper facing a penalty.

Any opportunity to hear Mat Mereri is to be seized with both hands; his is a genuinely unique voice on the violin and his lumpen, gliding harmonics have a logic all of their own. Sit with him for a while and he starts to sound like something very special indeed. Cook, on the other hand, is a pretty generic bop-to-free player; he neither distinguishes nor disgraces himself here, although his contributions to the head arrangements are pretty much indispensable.

Yaun himself sometimes struggles here, as with his own Dolphyesque "Runup", which is taken at a tempo he clearly finds uncomfortable. In the more spacious passages, he is able to play within his competence and some nice ideas emerge, though he does have some maturing to do if he is to leave behind the licks and the vague sketchy shapes to hone his playing to a point where execution matches conception. The quality of that conception is evidenced by the four strong compositions which he contributes to this session, and it will be interesting to see how he develops from here.

Richard Cochrane

The Keith Yaun Quartet: Amen: Improvisations on Messiaen

([Boxholder](#): BXH010)

Keith Yaun (guitar), Bern Nix (guitar), Mat Maneri (violin), Johnny McLellan (drums)

Classical jazz projects are, as the sleeve notes to this one gamely admit, a rather risible business. Yet here it is anyway; an album of Messiaen's music, reduced and arranged for a quartet whose members are strong on improvisation.

Of course, this isn't the kind of twee little project which culls favourite tunes from a long-dead composer's repertoire and swings 'em. Messiaen, for a start, wasn't much interested in tunes of the sort the milkman hums while doing his rounds, and the members of this quartet, although actually rather varied, and not the gurning tuxedoed lounge lizards who crank out Brahms lullabies or Tschaichovsky lollipops for a roomful of cocktail barflies.

Indeed, Yaun has focussed heavily on Messiaen's vertical concerns rather than his melodic or rhythmic ones. All five pieces are slow-moving and very sparse, with the focus on ensemble sound rather than solos. It's not clear whether Yaun has filleted whole harmonic structures out of these pieces (one rather doubts it, although it would certainly be feasible), but there's a sense that, somehow, the music has been summarised rather than abbreviated, boiled down rather than merely cut into portions.

In fact, though, it's best not to think of this record as having anything to do with Messiaen at all. It doesn't sound like anything he might have composed anyway. Listening to it instead purely as a quartet album of lightly-composed free jazz is a somewhat more enlightening approach to take.

In this light, it's McLellan who first stands out. His drumming is sharp, punctual, rhythmic without implying any pulse, and full of space. Choosing to play up-front but leave room for others was much better than the walk-on-eggshells alternative. His voice is a dynamic, very involving one here, and at many times it's the most prominent one, too. He makes a very impressive contribution to this frankly drummer-unfriendly music which is worth the price of admission on its own.

Mat Maneri isn't an audibly pushy player, but he does know how and when to grab the spotlight. Here, on baritone violin (which adds much of the viola's range to the fiddle), he plays long, microtonally shifting notes for much of the time, bursting out just occasionally to add a more soloistic statement. He glues this music together, and without him much of it simply wouldn't work.

As for the two guitarists, the word here is "understated", a fact which may surprise those who think of Nix only as a member of Prime Time. This said, however, he lends a very Ornettish slant to the material which is entirely appropriate. Yaun himself can be a less sure-footed player with slightly uncertain articulation, but his musical ideas are strong. This context, which allows him to underplay and doesn't impose the rigors of the solo spot, suits him well.

This is a rather marvellous record and a quite unexpected one. [Yaun's previous offering](#) was rather hit-and-miss, exposing the guitarist too much and restricting him to a free jazz genre which is clearly a bit narrow for him. The music on this disk is, on the contrary, open and spacious, with the emphasis on ensemble interactions evolving over extended time-periods (the five pieces are all between nine and fifteen minutes long). The results speak for themselves. Highly recommended.

Richard Cochrane

Patrick Zimmerli Ensemble: Expansion

([Songlines](#): SGL1530-2)

Patrick Zimmerli (tenor sax), Ben Monder (guitar), Stomu Takeishi (bass), Satoshi Takeishi (percussion)

Zimmerli writes a catchy tune, with a middle-eastern quality to its intervallic structure, although that may just be the influence of ancestors like Sanders and Cherry rather than anything more direct. He's very much within the current school of American free jazzers who swap fearsome complexity for a degree of accessibility to a non-specialist crowd.

That said, this is not a tame album, and Zimmerli's tenor, often throaty and squeaky at once, is certainly not the voice of compromise. Instead, the intention seems to be to couch this undeniably difficult stuff in the language of the neo hard bop one hears everywhere these days passed off as new jazz.

His peers in this quartet help reinforce this, giving Zimmerli an interesting, unusual setting or his prowling tenor, a setting which is generally pulsed and structured by a different kind of jazz than that which informs a Charles Gayle quartet, for example. While many (musings) readers will prefer Gayle's approach, most jazz fans won't, and Zimmerli's real talent is to make a music which radio stations might play and the public at large might actually get into.

Richard Cochrane

Joachim Zoepf: Kollateralschaden

([Nur/Nicht/Nur](#): no number)

Joachim Zoepf (reeds)

Solo saxophone albums of such extreme tendencies can easily be hard going even if they're interesting in short bursts. Zoepf, however, avoids boring us with long, screaming harmonics and instead turns in an album in the old-fashioned sense -- a collection of pieces which stand alone, which are all very different, and which enthrall by, in part, making you wonder what's going to happen next.

Let's start at the beginning where, if you haven't inspected the liner notes, you won't even be sure what sort of instrument Zoepf plays at all. He has a range of techniques involving special articulations, and especially vocalising, which can go completely beyond the sounds which we're accustomed to hearing coming out of a saxophone. Even those who listen regularly to players like Butcher or Doneda who are constantly exploring "extended techniques" will be astonished by some of the things Zoepf can do with a soprano sax, and will be amazed that he wants to do some of the others.

The album opens, then, with a selection of mouth-noises which barely engage the reed at all, although they do, and with hindsight the tenor sax can be detected right from the start. Initially, however, one is more likely to be reminded of players who specialise in junk or invented instruments, or even avant garde vocalists. It's a bravado opening, quiet and wily, toying with the listener's expectations and leading those who haven't yet read the information right up the garden path.

Just to keep the surprises coming, Zoepf then reveals the other side of his peculiar musical personality, striding into the second piece on bass clarinet sounding for all the world like Eric Dolphy opening the album *Last Date* as if nothing untoward had happened. Although, as one would expect, Zoepf uses far more varied articulations than Dolphy ever did, that close connection remains throughout the piece.

What to make, then, of this odd double strategy, opening the disk twice, as it were, once as an experiment in post-saxophone sound manipulation, then again as a freebop workout? Well, whatever we make of it, the two tendencies survive intact throughout the disc, in various combinations. Make no mistake, this can be as in-your-face as solo sax gets, pushing articulation way beyond the handful of tricks associated with jazz expressivity. Yet Zoepf chooses to keep a link to jazz in here, and not just on bass clarinet; on tenor or soprano he can sound like Dolphy's oft underrated alto, too.

That's a rather unfashionable approach right now. European improvisation has long distanced itself from free jazz in an attempt to educate the less enlightened about its origins in classical Modernism and, in some cases, performance art. No post-Webernianisms for Zoepf, however; this is a sort of jazz, although if it's free jazz then it certainly doesn't sound like David S Ware. Focussing on the serpentine complexities of post-bop rather than reaching back into the blues, Zoepf is doing something which seems to be all his own.

Walter Schreiber's sleeve notes -- in rather flakey translation, to be fair to him -- imply that much of this is arch postmodernist irony, and cast Zoepf as a sort of deconstructionist clown, mucking about with genres as the whim takes him. Nothing could be further from the impression gained by sitting down and listening to this album. Zoepf comes across as a musician making a brave attempt to forge a personal language out of almost incommensurable ideas. He is striving to bring together the kind of jazz which Braxton likes to play -- fast, hard-edged, gleaming, complicated -- with an outsider set of techniques which almost preclude the articulation of notes at all. The results are boiling with something quite different from emotion; the music Zoepf plays may be detached and witty, but it's also very compulsive listening.

Richard Cochrane

Masada: Het

(DIW: DIW-195)

John Zorn (alto sax), Dave Douglas (trumpet), Greg Cohen (bass), Joey Baron (drums)

In Masada, Zorn has found three top-drawer collaborators and a simple but inspirational concept, equal parts Jewish kletzmer and early Ornette. Yet this, their eighth album on DIW, is not significantly different from their first or points between. Those of us who loved Masada Alef and enjoyed its successor may now be wondering how much longer Zorn is going to keep mining this vein. The sheer flow of ideas suggests that they could happily work their way through the rest of the Hebrew alphabet, but will anyone be left listening?

Cohen and Baron alone make every Masada album worth owning. Baron's light-fingered bounce propels even the more arrhythmic tracks, while most revel in a boppish swing with which he is more than at home. A brittle sense of timbre on the toms and cymbals replaces the hiss of the ride and crack of snare of his forefathers, giving him an ultra-modern sound which perhaps belies his faultless sense of beat placement and density. Cohen, meanwhile, keeps to conventional technique and a bebop sensibility, and fits with Baron like a leg in a hip joint.

Masada Het is at least as good as the rest of the series in terms of both playing and composition. The latter remains a mixture of Jewish song, spikey freebop and, in "Halom", a Tim Berne-like tongue-twister. Zorn seems as in love with this invented genre as at the beginning, and his composition has some slightly more tricky moments than the head arrangements which dominate Masada's repertoire. He and Douglas are as committed and virtuosic soloists as you could hope to hear in the old-school free jazz idiom, of course, although in this group the playing is usually pretty conservative in terms of contemporary ideas about the avant garde.

In reality, Zorn's music is almost always about genre, whether in the obvious stylistic juxtapositions of Naked City or in his conceptualist reworkings of Morricone, and genre is the key to understanding Masada. Zorn's indebtedness to Coleman, most forcefully expressed on his paint-stripping Spy vs Spy album, is here in spades, and Douglas makes a wonderfully irreverent Don Cherry. From this foundation, they move freely between bebop and no-wave figurations and, yes, kletzmer, in the way that Zorn attacks his more melodic phrases and, of course, in his composition.

The listening is certainly worth it, even if it is exhausting -- and with Zorn involved, should we really expect any different? He has always had confidence in pursuing extremes, particularly those imposed by the mainstream music industry, and the Masada project, while superficially his most "accessible" work to date, is no exception. Perhaps it is no surprise that Zorn has taken this music down this particular route; a single album may have shared a whiff of novelty with so many other "Jewish Melodies in Jazztime" projects, but to draw from this project over twenty one hours of music will, at least, function as a statement of serious intent. Those who own nothing by the group are urged to get one of their albums -- and this one is as good a start as any -- although whether even the faithful really need more than a couple on their shelves is another question.

Richard Cochrane

JOHN ZORN -- The Classic Guide to Strategy Volumes 1 & 2 (Tzadik TZ7305)

John Zorn (reeds, game calls etc.)

Who but the outrageously wealthy can keep up with the slew of work which pours out of Zorn's Tzadik label? Yet the aesthetic value of each offering is in no way diminished by this hyper-supply. A beautiful fetish-object it certainly is, with its cartridge-paper insert and smart pictures and fiddly gold lettering -- if Tzadik ever start pressing vinyl a lot of us are going to have to renegotiate our overdrafts -- but easy-to-love packaging is something we've come to expect from Zorn, right alongside hard-to-like music.

The Classic Guide to Strategy has the feel of a manifesto. It is Zorn solo -- sort of -- playing, after a fashion, a selection of (sort of) reed instruments. Inspired by Musashi's military treatise The Book of Five Rings, the back cover has Zorn's hands hovering over a table covered with mouthpieces, game calls and dismembered horns, as if about to play a move in a very convoluted game of musical Go.

The first two tracks, which account for over half of the album's nigh-on eighty minutes' duration, have the same feel as those vocabulary statements made by the great figures of British Improv during the early seventies. Juxtaposing and overlapping Zorn's mutant articulations with little concern for form, each is a twenty-minute stream of consciousness. He vocalises, bubbles, screams, whispers, unafraid of any sound at all which might be coaxed from anything laid out on his table. This, at a guess, is volume one.

The remainder is a good deal more appealing, presenting six tracks of varying length, each characterised by a gestural language possibly derived from Japanese art. The playing here is far more controlled and logical, although it remains excoriating throughout. The front cover, a calligraphic ideogram, might seem to imply that this anti-formalist abstraction is connected with the Bushido tradition which is supposed to have inspired it. This, however, is a recording which does not want to be connected with anything else. Buried in his uproariously self-aggrandising sleeve notes, we find a reference to this music, "a language that only one person spoke and no one understood", and that just about hits the nail on the head.

Difficult? Certainly. Uncompromising? Oh yes. But a worthy addition to Zorn's catalogue? It's something of a curate's egg, and volume one is the more ambitious but also the less refined -- it comes from a gut desire for sound, while volume two is already pulling these incredible textures together into pieces of music which explore them in virtuosic detail. Indeed, the second half of this recording is quite phenomenal. Disastrous for the uninitiated, but a remarkable piece of work, and die-hards will love it.

Zorn, John: Masada Het (DIW: DIW-195) John Zorn (alto sax), Dave Douglas (trumpet), Greg Cohen (bass), Joey Baron (drums)

John Zorn (gig: 29/10/98) UK performance from the lesser-sighted genius.

Richard Cochrane

Jonathon Zorn: ContraBass

([Newsonic](#): newsonic11)

[Jonathon Zorn](#) (bass)

The title, perhaps, implies a conflict; that Zorn doesn't play contrabass, but ContraBass, against the bass, in that antagonistic relationship which so many improvisors have with their instruments. But the sound of this disc doesn't bear that out. Here is a player whose approach is one of technical control even in the most extreme of areas. Unlike some practitioners, he seems not to rely on chance so much as on concentration.

This is indicated by his claim that these are "compositions". As an important part of the musical activity surrounding Wesleyan University and the [Middletown Creative Orchestra](#), it shouldn't be surprising that he uses composition and improvisation together, nor that the element of improvisation is used to add detail to general forms rather than to expressive ends. This disc, in common with other Newsonic releases, is resolutely anti-Romantic.

That might be taken to imply that "ContraBass" is a heartless record; it isn't. Indeed, this is no abstract formalism but committed and often exhilarating stuff. Zorn uses repeated rhythms less than general melodic shapes which are subjected to ad hoc variations. He has a fantastic sense of harmony, too, as "Phys111" amply demonstrates; far from random note-picking or static droning, Zorn likes to move his harmonies around and keep them dynamic. Put together, these features make his playing extremely involving even as it eschews entirely the conventions of the blues.

Saddled with a hard name to live up to, Zorn is a unique and extremely imaginative voice on the bass. While many solo bass albums suffer from a lack of focus or an over-dependence on tricks, Zorn's extended techniques are almost entirely of the organic, bow-on-strings variety and so his playing flows smoothly along. There's barely a note of jazz on this disc -- and hardly a single pizzicato, even -- and yet, like John Butcher, Zorn is able to sustain this New Music aesthetic in a solo context without becoming boring. He can do it simply because he can focus closely enough to make sense of the music, although in this case the use of composition does help him shape the music (Butcher does his shaping in situ, as it were). Like virtually everyone on this scene, he's ploughing an unfashionable furrow, but in this case he's doing it extremely well and deserves wider recognition.

Richard Cochrane

MUSINGS LINKS

PLEASE NOTE: THIS IS A HISTORIC DOCUMENT FROM 1999. LINKS MAY BE OUT OF FUNCTION.

Below is a collection of links to other resources on the web which deal specifically with experimental music, free jazz and related stuff. If you have a site which contains relevant information, let us know. We don't carry links to artists' or labels' homepages here, mostly because the sites listed under [meta-resources](#) below already do an excellent job in that area. An exception is organisations which run labels but also provide other useful information or services online.

This page is divided up into broad types of resource:

[Meta-Resources](#) [being compilations of links, specialist search engines or other sites-about-sites]
[Publications](#) [being sites which carry journalistic content (like this one)]
[Internet Radio](#) [being places to hear, as well as read about, creative music of all kinds]
[Shops](#) [being a motley collection of shops which specialise in the strange, rare and exotic]
[Regional Organisations](#) [being musicians' co-operatives or other sites of national/local interest]
[Organisations](#) [being sites carrying info like gig calendars, studies, essays etc]
[Mailing Lists](#) [being email-based resources for more advanced users]

If you need to translate pages on the web between English and French, German, Italian or Portuguese (in either direction), try [Babel Fish](#) at AltaVista.

Meta-resources

[Ari's simple list of record labels](#)....[frighteningly large no-frills resource]
[Johannes Bergmark](#).....[Scandinavian free improv links]
[Chicago Jazz Archive](#).....[encyclopaedic reference site]
[Contemporary Jazz Links](#).....[just what it sounds like]
[Darmstadt Jazz Institute](#).....[another uber-resource]
[Electronica resources](#).....[nice selective list of links]
[European Free Improvisation](#)....[label and artist info]
[Japanese Free Improvisors](#)....[artist, label and gig info]
[JazzLinks](#).....[mostly not very experimental, but some stuff here]
[Jazz Musicians' Web Pages](#).....[handy way to find musicians]
[JazzNet](#).....[another selective jazz link site]
[Jazz World Society Database](#).....[jazz search-engine; pretty useful]
[Just Intonation Network](#).....[web sites about just intonation]
[LSD@](#).....[oddly bitty but intriguing music-related links page]
[New Music Links](#).....[selective contemporary classical links]
[New Music Site Seeing Tour](#).....[ditto]
[Nubian Roots](#).....["new thing"-based site]
[PK Artists Index](#).....[another way to find musicians' sites]
[WNUR](#).....[style-specific site -- masses of jazz links]

E-zines and paper publications

[descriptions are intended to just give a flavour; most of these sites are pretty eclectic]

[Absolute Jazz](#)....[whole range of jazz]
[All That Noise](#)....[industrial]
[Alternate Music Press](#)....[whole range of experimental, esp. industrial/noise]
[Browbeat](#)....[industrial/noise]
[Cadence](#)....[jazz, free improv]
[Centre Culturel André Malraux in Nancy](#)....[French magazine/club etc]
[Electro-Shock Therapy](#)....[whole range of experimental, esp. industrial/noise]
[Fennec](#)....[French zine; a variety of leftfield musics here]
[Free Jazz Forum](#)....[email discussion forum]
[Halana](#)....[ambient/noise]
[Hollow Ear](#) [dead link]....[extremely eclectic experimental music site]
[The Improvisor](#)....[free improvisation]
[Improjazz](#)....[free improvisation (in French)]
[Jazz Improvisation Almanac](#)....[a sort of tutorial about listening to (straight-ish) jazz]

[Jazz Improv](#)....[instructional magazine for jazz musicians]
[Jazzline](#)....[whole range of jazz]
[Jazzlife](#)....[free jazz info]
[Jazzopen Online](#)....[German jazz e-zine]
[Jazz Review](#)....[whole range of jazz]
[Juxtaposition](#)....[variety of experimental musics]
[Laudanum](#)....[Australian zine with Real Audio]
[Le Jazz](#)....[French-language jazz site]
[Mastock](#)....[new, very grungy experimental electronics zine]
[Musicworks](#)....[Canadian bilingual print magazine]
[ND](#)....[ambient/minimal]
[New Art Music](#)....[contemporary classical]
[Night Owl](#)....[whole range of jazz]
[NMA](#)....[Australian new music/composition magazine]
[NoiseGate](#)....[whole range of experimental, esp. industrial/noise]
[Obsolete](#)....[a very nice e-zine]
[Opprorium](#)....[New Zealand avant garde mag]
[Paris Transatlantic](#)....[International avant garde review]
[Redazione Musiche](#)....[eclectic experimental music mag, in Italian] [Tentacle](#)....[focussed mainly on the Pacific Northwestern US scene]
[Urban Sounds](#)....[electronic music; mostly straight-ish, but it sure is purty lookin']
[The Wire](#)....[leftfield electronics and "out-rock"]
[The Whole Shebang](#)....[US free jazz discographies plus some legendary net literature]

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Internet Radio

[...places to listen to creative music on the net]
[Antenna Radio](#)....[free jazz and related stuff]
[EarLabs](#)....[not really a radio station so much as a forum for exchange of experimental MP3s; recommended]
[The Kraft-o-Matic Bed o' Nails](#)....[weekly netcast]
[New American Radio](#)....[radio art site]
[Radio Beethoven](#)....[includes some avant garde programming]
[Roulette](#)....[covering the NY creative music scenes]
[WFMU](#)....["freeform" radio station; anything can happen]
[Zu Casa](#)....[free improv, noise and other extremities]

Shops and distributors

[(musings) can't accept any liability, etc, etc, etc... you know the drill]
[33 Degrees](#)....[US shop]
[Ambient Soho](#)....[UK shop -- no online ordering]
[A-Musik](#)....[German shop]
[Aquarius](#)....[US shop]
[Cadence](#)....[US distributor]
[Cheap Thrills](#)....[Canadian shop with online ordering]
[Depth Charge](#)....[UK shop and distributor]
[Dorobo](#)....[Australian shop]
[Forced Exposure](#)....[US shop with online ordering]
[Frontlist](#)....[online academic bookshop, many avant garde music titles]
[Le Fennec](#)....[French distributor]
[M-Dos](#)....[Austrian shop]
[Mole Jazz](#)....[UK shop]
[Motion State](#)....[eclectic avant garde US shop]
[Open Door](#)....[German shop -- email only]
[Other Music](#)....[US no-wave/out-rock/free jazz shop]
[Rough Trade](#)....[UK shop and distributor]
[RRRecords](#)....[US records]
[ShopFinder](#)....[can find record shops in any city, allegedly]
[Staalplaat](#)....[German shop]
[Twisted Village](#)....[US shop]
[Verge](#)....[Canadian distributor]

Regional Organisations

[Mostly musicians' collectives or other promotional/self-help groups, also a handful of very regional information resources.]

[AACM](#)....[official site]

[Alliance for Improvised Music](#)....[North Carolina Co-operative]

[American Musicians' Group](#)....[non-profit musicians' organisation]

[American Music Centre](#)....[US composed music organisation]

[Av-Art](#)....[Danish musicians' collective and label]

[CEDI](#)....[Spanish musicians' organisation]

[European Jazz Network](#)....[EU jazz site]

[Filibuste](#)....[French all-media arts group based around Toulouse and Albi]

[FRIM](#)....[Swedish free improv association]

[History of Experimental music in North Carolina](#)....[Large text-based archive]

[Improvised Music in Argentina](#)....[Not much here yet, but it's a new site so keep an eye on it]

[Japanese Free Improvisors](#)....[artist info etc]

[Logos Foundation](#)....[Flanders non-profit new music org]

[London Musicians' Collective](#)....[Southern English musicians' organisation]

[Nerve Technologies](#)....[Northern English musicians' group, lots of content already]

[Pro.Avantgarde](#)....[German artists' and musicians' collective]

[SPNM](#)....[English new classical gigs, recordings etc -- email only]

[Tsuge's Free Improvisation 99](#)....[Japanese information]

[V2](#)....[US artists' collective]

[Werkgroep Improviserende Musici](#)....[Flemish Association of Improvising Musicians]

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Organisations, Academic Institutions and General Sites

[23five](#)....[US sound art org]

[AUMFidelity](#)....[label site with useful artist info]

[Centre for New Music and Audio Technologies](#)....[Berklee-based experiments]

[Danish Institute of Electroacoustic Music](#)....[does exactly what it says on the tin]

[European Conference of Promoters of New Music](#)....[useful starting-point for contacting promoters]

[IRCAM](#)....[all-powerful centre for academic electroacoustics]

[Harmolodic](#)....[Ornette's site, with info on harmolodic and related artists]

[Knitting Factory](#)....[gig schedules, CD releases, artist site links and the rest]

[New Music Bazaar](#)....[eccentric composed music site]

[NewMusNet](#)....[new composed music site]

[Other Minds](#)....[San Francisco experimental music site]

[One Final Note](#)....[very varied info on free jazz and related]

[Saudades](#)....[good place to find out about US artists touring Europe]

[Sonic Arts Network](#)....[academic electro-acoustic site]

[S'Press Pavillion](#)....[German experimental music/arts org]

[Termite Club](#)....[Sheffield (UK) experimental music club]

[The 60s, Chicago and AACM](#)....[with pictures and audio]

[Unsound Automatic](#)....[iconoclastic UK arts org with pictures, sounds etc]

[Victo](#)...[Canadian festival -- latest listings/information]

Mailing Lists

Joining mailing lists is an important way to find out information and make contact with other enthusiasts all over the world. All you need is an email account.

Please **ONLY use the auto-subscription links below if you're familiar with mailing lists already** -- if that's not you, you are STRONGLY encouraged to read [Brian Edmonds' Etiquette FAQ](#) and familiarise yourself with the [jargon and terminology](#) you'll inevitably run into.

NOTE: At the very least, always, ALWAYS read the "info" file which you receive when you join a list before posting to it. Inappropriate postings often elicit a very hostile response from email communities. You have been warned.

[Lowercase Sound](#)

Your mail should be blank

A busy list surrounding extreme ambient, field recording and other "noise" or "conceptual" musics. Often very intense debates.

[Musings-L](#)

Your mail should be blank

List attached to this site; mostly used for announcements, and hence very low-volume.

[Zorn List](#)

Your email should contain only the following text: subscribe zorn-list [your email address]

Busy and populous list which ranges far beyond Zorn and the New York scene. One of the best lists available, if you can handle the pace.

[JAZZ-L](#)

Your email should contain only the following text: SUBSCRIBE JAZZ-L [your name]>

A huge and incredibly busy list which ranges over everything from swing to the avant garde. Good-humoured, knowledgeable and unpretentious, but this is another list which has a very high number of postings each day.

[The Wire](#)

Your mail should be blank.

A very busy and very eclectic list; linked with but not necessarily approved by UK magazine The Wire.

[Datacide](#)

Your mail should be blank.

A low-volume list for discussion of Elliott Sharp and related artists. Popular with composers.

[Musikeion](#)

Your email should contain only the following text: subscribe musikeion [your email address]

An academic list devoted to musical semiotics. Technical, high-volume but often very fascinating discussions.

[Auricle](#)

Your email should contain only the following text: subscribe auricle [your email address]

Auricle is an occasional announcement list run from the Auricle web site. You can't post messages to this list.

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End of Musings collection