



That Nepenthic Place
Dayna Stephens (Sunnyside)
by Robert Milburn

Saxophonist Dayna Stephens is of that special breed whose inventiveness is progressive enough not to be stale yet not so abstract as to sacrifice accessibility. On his recent effort, the tenor player surrounds himself with like-minded progenitors, such as trumpeter Ambrose Akinmusire and pianist Taylor Eigsti.

On *That Nepenthic Place*, it is easy to understand why Stephens likens the group to nepenthe, a drug from Homer's *Odyssey* that banishes one's troubles. His stellar supporting cast aside, it is Stephens' deft hand at composition and obvious chops that prove exceedingly refined. A prime example is "Full Circle", patiently cascading horn textures evolving into a gently simmering swing, buoyed by the sumptuous delicacy of Eigsti. Meanwhile, the dexterous lines of "Common Occurrences" provide sufficient inspiration to send the band into an explosive postbop exposition, with the saxophonist screeching amid a flurry of cymbals.

The album tempers its intensity with vocalist Gretchen Parlato joining on Van Heusen-Burke's "But Beautiful". Parlato purposefully lags behind the rhythm section's weightless floating, employing a breathless whisper to express the song's conflictingly tearful lyrics. Following the vocalist's gut-wrenching passion, Stephens becomes exceedingly melodic, his tenderness matching Parlato's to great effect. "Dr. Wong's Bird Song" was written for Bay area jazz commentator and ornithologist Herb Wong and the complicated weave of sinuous riffing is underpinned by Joe Sanders' bubbly bass work. The song quickly yields to a bluesy strut wherein Akinmusire looses a dazzling and seemingly endless array of clever licks.

The foreboding dynamism of "American Typhoon" flows evenly into John Coltrane's "Impressions", with the former serving as the calm before the latter's chaos. This all culminates with Stephens' fleeting abstractions and drummer Justin Brown's frantic eruptions. As *That Nepenthic Place* unfolds, it becomes abundantly clear that Stephens has found the band that both inspires and complements his artistic creativity.

For more information, visit sunnysiderecords.com. Stephens is at *Smalls* Aug 21st-22nd. See Calendar.

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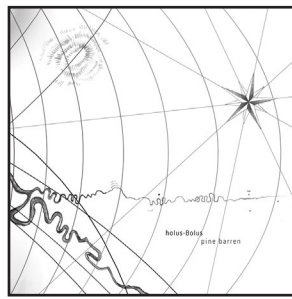
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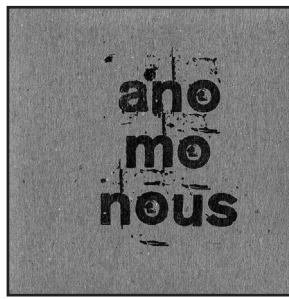
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Pine Barren
holus-Bolus (Prom Night)
by Clifford Allen



At this point it's become de rigueur for an improviser to be involved in a host of projects, either because work is hard to get or a player has a lot of engines in the roundhouse. Baritone saxophonist and bass/contrabass-clarinetist Josh Sinton has recently come to the improvisational fore through his work as part of the soprano-less Steve Lacy repertoire quartet Ideal Bread. But like many of his low-horn colleagues - John Surman and Jason Stein come to mind - Sinton's reach is very broad and encompasses electro-acoustic music, solo performance, contemporary composition and invigorating sideman work with the likes of composer Anthony Braxton, trumpeter Nate Wooley and drummer Harris Eisenstadt.

Holus-Bolus is Sinton's quintet with Jon Irabagon on tenor and alto saxophones, Jonathan Goldberger on guitar, Peter Bitenc on bass and Mike Pride on drums and vibes. *Pine Barren* is, so far, the group's only release; Sinton also re-imagined it as solo music, released as part of a split CD on Engine Records in 2012. Prom Night, which is an artist-run imprint and mostly acts as a digital release/dissemination station, hosts the files for the ensemble music, which as yet remains without a 'physical home'. Like a number of Sinton's works, the titles and pieces on *Pine Barren* are biographical in nature and reflect the composer's memories both real and imagined. Biography is a slippery slope for the listener who hasn't 'lived' these works, but there's a lot to grasp aesthetically - "Through the Trees I Saw Stone Caves on the Beach" (in two parts) is a piece that works through many latticed parts and is reminiscent of composer Steve Reich's large ensemble music of the '70s. Sinton lies somewhere between Pepper Adams and Peter Brötzmann in a tough dialogue with Irabagon on the lickety-split "Deeper in the Woods than You", a brief but caterwauling tune. While some of the uptempo numbers have a codified jazz-rock slink that seems slightly rehashed, the soli push hard with reverberant squall and seem to offer something entirely beyond. The group's name refers to something "all at once" and if this set is any indication, life is to be experienced as hugely varied and an immediate constant.

The trio Anomonus is a very different beast; also released on Prom Night in both physical and digital editions, the disc's 20 sections blend into a continuous improvisation between Sinton's amplified contrabass clarinet, Denman Maroney's prepared "hyperpiano" and the electronics of Ben Miller (in other contexts also a reed player and guitarist). As rugged as it is spare, the music of Anomonus often aligns itself with the confounding blends of MEV or AMM rather than anything in the traditional 'creative music' arc. Warbling, woody breath combines with warped piano-guts scrapes and icy melodic fragments from Maroney's keyboard while a range of sampled and mixed sounds give a ghostly and unsettled sheen to the proceedings. Glass and assorted objects, close-mic'd on Maroney's stringed box, whine and leach elongated, skull-shoving pings, shrouded by sputtering and muted crackle. At times it can be difficult to discern what sonic imprints come from reeds and what come from electronics, as feedback and indeterminate glitches attach themselves to both Sinton and Miller, though the latter tends toward unsightly patchwork and ear-splitting harmonics. Sinton's contrabass clarinet, an unwieldy

but powerful axe, often seems to occupy a backseat compared to the dark, industrial clamor of Maroney and Miller's actions - fear not, his push is felt. The only caveat with the digital edition this writer notices is that the 'seamlessness' of the trio's excoriation/exploration is broken up, so to get the full effect of Anomonus' music, the limited edition CD-R (housed in a silkscreened, chipboard sleeve) is recommended. Nevertheless, this is a fascinating set and alongside Holus-Bolus, it gives one a different lens on Sinton's engaging practice.

For more information, visit promnightrecords.com. Sinton is at *Ibeam Brooklyn* Aug. 12th-13th with *Ideal Bread*. See Calendar.

IN PRINT



Why Jazz Happened
Marc Myers (University of California Press)
by Kurt Gottschalk

The title of Marc Myers' excellent new jazz history isn't *Why Jazz Happened?* Thankfully, there's no question mark in the title. Rather, Myers has written a refreshingly concrete volume on a genre that stubbornly, sometimes proudly, refuses to be defined.

The blogger and *Wall Street Journal* critic pulls this off quite handily by considering the development of jazz over three decades from the outside. He takes the lineage of ragtime, blues and improvisation as a given and concerns himself with the external factors - the recording industry; the rise of radio; military service during World War II; Hollywood; magnetic tape and the long-playing record; the popularity of rhythm'n'blues and rock'n'roll; the Civil Rights movement and technological improvements in amplification and electric instruments - that shaped the music's evolution from 1942-72 (with a brief epilogue bringing us rather hastily to the current day). Each of those variables, in Myers' argument, spawned a new style of jazz, from bebop through hardbop, West Coast cool, the avant garde and fusion, with anecdotes about such figures as Charlie Parker, Max Roach, Sonny Rollins, Creed Taylor and Burt Bacharach helping to move the storytelling along.

For the most part, the book focuses on New York and LA. Especially satisfying is the chapter on Los Angeles in the '50s, where television and movie work and the isolation of a culture built around cars and suburbs (as opposed to New York's compact neighborhoods and nightclubs) changed the way the music was made.

Myers is boldly unafraid of discussing race and class in his formulation. New Orleans only gets mentions, however, and there's little about Chicago before the '60s, when it becomes Myers' staging ground for discussion of social consciousness and race relations as extenuating factors.

As such it's limited as a jazz history, which isn't what it wants to be anyway. The entertainment industry is located on the coasts and that's where decisions were made. Myers simply follows the money.

For more information, visit ucpress.edu