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OPEN SPACES: FINDINGS, SOUNDINGS, RELEASES, PRACTICES

ON JUNE 23, I SAW A PERFORMANCE of the Upstream Ensemble with Alan Syliboy and the Thundermakers at the Marquee Club in Halifax. A quasi-immersive experience thanks to Lukas Pearse's multiple gifts for technology-art interface, this encounter of avant-garde, improvisation-focused new music practitioners mesmerized a delighted audience on a quiet summer's night. The Upstream Ensemble is a versatile mid-size group including both Halifax members and visiting artists from New York, and their adventurous soundscapes came together with the rocking and folky base of the Thundermakers. The pulse of the drum and the spoken word of Alan Syliboy were powerful indeed, though his voice can seem so vulnerable and fragile, as though conscious at times of its limited carry. The rhythmic, melodic meshing (nothing so definitive as a fusion) was thrillingly completed by projections of Syliboy's paintings, which climbed the walls and opened up the ceiling to millenary imaginings. Audience members raved about the sense of place and rare occasion that had been created. It was an amazing, privileged, and non-programmatic act of creative coming together, which was beautiful and unpretentious. I'm sure we all rode home on the backs of Syliboy's whales.

On July 11, I saw a performance of the Murley/Liebman Quartet at the Halifax Jazz Festival. This quartet of circumstance formed during Dave Liebman's recent residency at the University of Toronto, where the admired veteran, who has collaborated with greats like Miles Davis and Chick Corea and was the leader of several remarkable ground-breaking bands, joined up with mid-career faculty members Mike Murley (saxophone), Jim Vivian (bass), and Terry Clarke (drums). Through their work at the school, they developed a rapport that led to the recording of the Juno-nominated album *Live at U of T* (2018). In fact, Murley and Liebman have a longer history in

Canada, dating back to when Murley was a rising saxophone talent and Liebman was his teacher and mentor—a relationship that saw a previous live album recorded at the Atlantic Jazz Festival in 2003 and released as *Day and Night* (2008).

Certainly one of the highlights of this year’s jazz festival, the quartet ran through a set of mostly well-honed standard tunes from their common repertoire with a few lesser-known and original pieces thrown in to very good effect. Throughout the evening, Vivian and Clarke proved repeatedly, with their easy (but it’s not easy) responsiveness and their ability to generate a full-spectrum feel, why they are renowned as one of if not the best rhythm sections in Canada. Some of the many high points included the back-to-back ballads “In a Sentimental Mood” and “Soul Eyes,” with some gorgeous concentrated, supportive playing and a remarkable, apparently intuitive shift in tonality via brief polytonality in the final choruses of Liebman’s solo. Several of the pieces where both saxophonists opted for their soprano horns produced jagged, potent combinations that could be both gut-wrenching in their driving intentionality and heart-rending in their unutterable vulnerability. Murley’s wonderful piece “Open Spaces” was also breathtaking, and I wasn’t expecting Liebman’s straight flute and the multiple effects he generated from it. It was not the only arresting juxtaposition of the night, but it was an amazing one. The concert closed with “Footprints,” a Wayne Shorter piece that Liebman must have played thousands of times since his Miles Davis days. The mainline arrangement and relaxed tempo favoured Liebman’s structure and scrappiness and Murley’s lyrical pushing at boundaries. It was festival jazz of the finest kind in a beautiful setting.

On August 19, it was revealed that a forgotten recording featuring John Coltrane’s so-called Classic Quartet was hiding in plain sight on the soundtrack of Gilles Groulx’s film *Le chat dans le sac* (The Cat in the Bag, 1964). In 2000, the National Film Board’s director of international sales went into the vault to discover tapes that had been preserved but never released or commercialized. Within a few hours of confirming on Facebook that the music on the soundtrack was definitely an original recording, the Impulse! label was calling and a release was hatched. The title of the release, *Blue World* (2019), was taken from a redo of Harold Arlen’s “Out of the Blue.” It can be seen now as a third major recording in the vital year of 1964, and it must be set alongside the classics *Crescent* (1964) and *A Love Supreme* (1965). In the brochure, Grammy Award-winning music historian

Ashley Kahn makes the very important point that this hidden and forgotten session was the occasion for revisiting earlier repertoire at the very moment that the group had attained a forward-looking and spiritually-elevated character unprecedented in the history of jazz. The first revisit of “Naïma” (there are two takes here) plays in its entirety over the long opening sequence of the film, and it is a particularly powerful example of the quartet’s identity, its multiple levels, its expansive vision, and of course the achingly ambivalent beauty of Coltrane’s sound and inimitable lines. Three versions of “Village Blues” all offer nuanced angles of approach to that staple and Coltrane, McCoy Tyner, Tony Williams, and Jimmy Garrison tear into it with what I want to call a smouldering restraint each time. It is a fascinating record for real specialists and a deep and pleasurable listen for more casual fans. The gentle, reflective comments of the late filmmaker’s wife, Barbara Ulrich, are also worth reading in the liner notes.

In September, two notable recordings were released from different ecozones of the CanRock continent: the Rheostatics’ *Here Come the Wolves* (2019) and rootsy, senescent Bruce Cockburn’s intriguingly titled *Crowing Ignites* (2019)—his first all-instrumental release since *Speechless* (2005). These recordings were both released within a fortnight and were oddly inter-pertinent. We know that Martin Tielli of the Rheostatics cites Cockburn as a foundational influence and that electric violinist Hugh Marsh, a *complice* of Cockburn variably for several decades, has joined the boys from Etobicoke for this outing (as has Kevin Hearn, sometime keyboardist for the Bare Naked Ladies). What also draws these very different artists and recordings together is a willingness to play.

Here Come the Wolves is an intelligently and energetically orchestrated and produced rock album, which speaks of taking time and giving space to the ensemble to invent unexpected turns, room for solos, songs within songs, codas to codas, etc. These are all familiar devices that should be recognizable to enthusiasts of the group eager to hear their first recording since *2067* (2004). The new configuration (featuring Marsh and Hearn as well as the return of Dave Clark, the original drummer) also brings a number of additional gears of texture and chops that take the band even further in its quirky and compelling aural adventure. The opening track, “Vancouver,” establishes a mood and a palette and gives a lot to build on. Tielli quietly introduces the poetic, zen-like line “it’s a thing against the mountain” in his high (but not highest) register, and we’re already hooked. At a point midway

through what we could call the first verse, Marsh comes in with a repetitive figure and we realize that something exciting and new is being born. Hearn's delicate piano extensions on the harmonies are set perfectly in the mix, and Tielli later comes in with one of his soaring anthemic guitar lines, seemingly from nowhere. There is a kind of social conscience in the fractured words and flowing bass, which creates a sense of full engagement with beauty and trouble. But that description is far from exhaustive, as the album also contains tracks of childlike simplicity and pleasure ("Mountains and the Sea"), apocalyptic foreboding ("Here Come the Wolves"), straight up testorock shredding (Tielli on Dave Bidini's "AC/DC On The Stereo" is a loudly triumphant rock guitarist daring us to dare him further), meditative and romantic ballads ("Music is the Message"), and many *many* other modes and moods. The shambolic lyrics, the understated sometimes miniaturized virtuosity, and the variable polyphony (five members sing lead vocals at one point or another) all make for one of the best listens in the group's deep catalogue and surely one of the best records of any style or genre that will be released in Canada this year.

Cockburn's album, the title of which is a translation of the Cockburn clan motto *Ascendit Cantu* ("he arises with a song"), was recorded in his new home of San Francisco, California. It ranges across much of his well-established stylistic and emotional-spiritual terrain, yet it also conveys his desire to do and say more. It is a truly remarkable late statement of this fingerpicking virtuoso, who also happens to be a significant songwriter, although that dimension is simply hushed here except insofar as the whole thing really breathes singable lines. The lineage through Blind Willie Johnson is affirmed in the titles and in much of the playing. "April in Memphis," with its Martin Luther King Jr. inspiration and its fine video, is getting a lot of attention in the U.S. The connection of the droning bass, so crucial to the Cockburn sound, to Scottish bagpipe music comes through loud and clear in "Pibroch: The Wind in the Valley" and elsewhere. Cockburn's fascination with bells, chimes, cymbals, and gongs (an essential feature of his solo and band concerts since the 1980s) also gets what is probably its most extensive studio treatment here, with "Bells of Gethsemane" in particular being an almost unbearable (at times) psychedelic-mystical wash that is both elevating and disconcerting when listened to on a good stereo or set of headphones. Overall, though, the album is a worthy and stimulating statement from this consistent master, and his artist's note is certainly accurate in describing it

as “energetic, blunt, [and as] Scottish as can be.”

On October 7, I also saw a curated improvisation session at the NSCAD Art Bar in Halifax. The performance featured a string duo with Upstream’s Pearse on upright bass and Margaree’s Jacques Maingeau on violin as well as a brass duo with Andrew Jackson on trombone and Paul Saint-Amand on trumpet (and effects). At times walking jazzy-jauntily, at times running panickily, at times stuck in an atonal mud, at times taking off into a Sibelian sublimity, this was a particularly fine example of the Open Company concept, where a set by a pre-established group (or interaction of a group of groups, as here) is followed by a period of sitting-in by anyone and everyone with a desire to contribute. It was not a bad thing to run into on an early fall evening walk in Halifax. These Mondays in the richly-panelled Art Bar keep our ears on their toes, and I’m grateful for the challenge and the challengers.