



Imaginary Friends
Ralph Alessi (ECM)
by Tyran Grillo

Imaginary Friends marks an ECM threepeat for trumpeter Ralph Alessi. His connectivity with Ravi Coltrane (mostly on tenor saxophone), pianist Andy Milne, bassist Drew Gress and drummer Mark Ferber glows throughout nine originals, of which “Iram Issela” is the heartfelt introduction. Dedicated to Alessi’s daughter (the title is her name spelled backward), it meshes trumpet and piano without a hint of coercion. Coltrane lays low, letting the waves carry him where they will. Alessi’s friendship with him, going back to their student days at the California Institute of the Arts, resonates, as well as in the title track and “Oxide”, one of Alessi’s most exquisite compositions.

Their horns seem to have minds of their own. As free to roam as they are to harmonize, either can take the helm at any given moment, leading to exciting listening. Reflective turns like “Pittance” are all about the trumpet’s emotive powers while “Improper Authorities” allows Coltrane enough room to pave a highway over the rhythm section’s solid roadbed. “Melee” is another compositional masterstroke, which recalls the jigsaw approach of labelmate Tim Berne yet takes on fresh distinction by dint of a calligraphic soprano. All of this and more funnel into “Good Boy”, a tender quietus.

Most impressive is the relentless spirit of invention. With an average track length of about seven minutes, each tune is a feast for the ears. Indeed, there’s something downright edible about this session, scrumptious from first bite to last and in that proverbial sense dishes out one of the most savory records of the year so far.

For more information, visit ecmrecords.com. Alessi is at Greenwich House Music School Apr. 20th with Andy Milne. See Calendar.



Amarcord Nina Rota
Various Artists (Hannibal-Corbett vs. Dempsey)
by Stuart Broomer

Released in 1981, *Amarcord Nina Rota* was the first of producer Hal Willner’s remarkable series of tributes to composers as varied as Monk, Mingus, Kurt Weill and the Disney soundtrack creators, each disc a compilation of interpretations by a broad swath of musicians, though usually possessed of an almost *de rigueur* hipness, stretching from Sun Ra to Lou Reed.

Amarcord Nina Rota is not only the first: it might also be the best, in part because it’s in effect service music, adaptable because it’s previously adapted. All the music here came from soundtracks for Federico Fellini’s films written by Nina Rota (who died 40 years ago this month) and the music and films are so tightly knit it’s impossible to separate their qualities. From a whimsically stately pageant to a dream-like ardor, director and composer created magical states of mind, illuminating their subject matter.

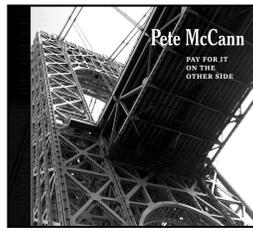
Several of Willner’s collaborators enhance those

moods by amplifying and emphasizing those piquant melodies and sly rhythms. Willner chose some fine solo performers, most notably Jaki Byard, whose unaccompanied piano opens and closes the set with themes from *Amarcord* and *La Strada*. The former has Byard recycling much of jazz piano history—blues, boogie and stride—to transpose and capture the original’s spirit; the latter is a warm, reflective send-off. For their part, vibraphonist Dave Samuels and guitarist Bill Frisell bring a glittering lyricism to their respective treatments of themes from *Juliet of the Spirits*. While soprano saxophonist Steve Lacy’s sometimes keening, sometimes sculptural renderings of pieces from *Roma* won’t invoke their origins, they have a crystalline quality all their own.

Two of the band tracks are superb. Carla Bley’s 8½ is effervescent and broadly comic, its melodies charged by the energized variations of trombonist Gary Valente and tenor saxophonist Gary Windo. Muhai Richard Abrams, leading “Notturmo” in a *La Dolce Vita* medley, creates a subtly expansive mood piece with a band including Harmon-muted trumpeter Claudio Roditi and pianist Amina Claudine Myers in particularly fine turns. A medley of early film themes (all pre-*La Dolce Vita*) arranged and conducted by William Fischer swings effortlessly and has an exuberant outburst from tenor saxophonist George Adams, a definite sound of the times. For music from *Satyricon*, composer David Amram plays guitar, penny whistle, double ocarina, shanai and claves, virtually overwhelming his band, save for French horn player Sharon Freeman who manages a brief simulation of a ram’s horn.

As fine as the individual moments are, the cumulative impact of Rota’s work and its resilience carries the recording and that’s a credit to Willner’s vision.

For more information, visit corbettvsdempsey.com



Pay For It On The Other Side
Pete McCann (McCannic Music)
by Elliott Simon

Pay For It On The Other Side is as much a paean to NYC with its George Washington Bridge cover and city-based musicians as it is to guitarist Pete McCann’s influences, which include jazz, rock, blues, funk and R&B. For his third CD in a row he is joined by alto saxophonist John O’Gallagher, keyboard player Henry Hey, bassist Matt Clohesy and drummer Mark Ferber. They more than meet the demands of a program that is rhythmically, harmonically and stylistically complex.

The title cut and “Cookout” are the release’s traditional swingers and showcase each member in boppish milieus. “Mud Flap” is unapologetically greasy as Hey’s Hammond B3 organ implores McCann’s scorching blues licks. “Nikhil”, a tribute to sitar player Nikhil Banerjee, is the most creative track, McCann and O’Gallagher navigating major and minor modes with incendiary lines bolstered by pounding bass and broad percussive work. The intensity does not abate until “Yonder” supplies the chill with mellow acoustic flavor. Similarly, the elegantly structured “Indemnity” follows the soaring transcendental electricity and soulfulness of “Polygons”.

McCann, Clohesy and Hey are comfortable with both the electric and acoustic versions of their instruments and switch off throughout. Hey is especially facile with these changeovers and plays clavinet, pianet and accordion in addition to piano and organ. While

“Is April Okay?” meanders a bit and never really answers its titular question, “Floor Three” is a delightfully unsettling place. Planet and angular guitar create a disquieting environment that powerful alto successfully blows away. Closer “Conventional Wisdom” belies its complexity with funky clavinet and cutting guitar. It would have been easy for McCann to produce an all-star blow-fest long on chops and low on creativity. *Pay For It On The Other Side* is long on both.

For more information, visit petemccann.com. McCann is at Bar Bayeux Apr. 3rd, North Square Lounge Apr. 14th with Roz Corral and Bar Next Door Apr. 15th with Jocelyn Medina and Apr. 19th as a leader. See Calendar.

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