



Peter Epstein Quartet *Polarities*

SONGLINES 1807

★★★★

From the first out-of-tempo double-stopped bass drone and loose unison moan by alto sax and trumpet, you know you're not in mainstream bebop-land any more. Saxophonist Peter Epstein, a former New Yorker who now runs the jazz studies program at the University of Nevada, Reno, writes the kind of pieces that could as easily be called structured improvisations as compositions. Which isn't to say that there aren't attractive themes throughout this CD, the kind of forms that serve as armatures for free exploration.

"Tiny Expanding Universe" enters on a bass

solo, then settles into a loose groove, opens into free counterpoint between alto sax and trumpet, and expands for an ardent, minor-tinged theme. Fortunately, Epstein is with people who know how to play this stuff. Bassist Sam Minaie and drummer Mark Ferber are descended from that school of intuitive rhythm teams whose defining masters were probably Charlie Haden and Paul Motian: They know how to make the beat felt without stating it. And trumpeter Ralph Alessi is Epstein's match in fashioning varied lines that coil and relax over those rhythms with flowing eloquence.

The band understands simple things, like how to make an entrance. After one of Epstein's note-stuffed frenzies ("Forever Now"), Alessi enters with soft, warbling whole notes. Meanwhile, thanks to Minaie and Ferber, that through-line rhythmic pulse never goes slack. There are also more conventional pleasures to be had here—the driving 10/8 folkloric groove of "Email From Nigeria," the sprightly soprano-trumpet theme of "Hurtle" and the pervasive bebop phrasing throughout.

The album could actually use more of those tight, peppy song forms. And yet, every moment of this CD is thoroughly engaging. That's not an easy thing to do when you're singing your songs in the land of the free.

—Jon Garelick

Polarities: Polarity; Tiny Expanding Universe; Forever Now; Old Yarn; Email From Nigeria; Aholdu; Constance; Hurtle; Stillness. (65:43)

Personnel: Peter Epstein, alto, soprano saxophones; Ralph Alessi, trumpet, cornet; Sam Minaie, bass; Mark Ferber, drums.

Ordering info: songlines.com

Reggie Watkins *One For Miles, One For Maynard*

CORONA MUSIC 70650

★★★

On his second disc as a leader, Pittsburgh-based trombonist Reggie Watkins takes a literal interpretation of the album's title, *One For Miles, One For Maynard*, paying tribute to the musicians with one tune each early on in the eight-tune recording. Using a core group of local players as his rhythm section, the alum of Maynard Ferguson's Big Bop Nouveau also picked some out-of-town guests to beef up his horn section.

Davis' "Shhh," which is one half of 1969's *In A Silent Way*, is compressed down by about 13 minutes and given a vibrant but restrained Latin feel. Vibes replace the original tune's atmospheric, bell-like guitar effects, and the tempo is brought up a few notches by a laid-back but driving percussion section. Watkins' open, spread-out tone is pensive, but he focuses the drifting sound Davis employs on the original with great purpose.

"Chala Nata," the Indian-tinged tune from Ferguson's *M.F. Horn, Volume 1*, is updated with a few turntable screeches and scratches and a funkier, more immediate accompaniment. Saxophonists Matt Parker and Rick Matt on soprano and tenor, respectively, churn out concise, busy solos, adding to the immediacy of the uptempo sections.



Surrounding these tunes, and a cover of McCoy Tyner's "Contemplation," Watkins packs in three originals and two compositions by Parker, all of them stylistically different but in the medium-to-uptempo range. The ensemble doesn't shy away from slower tempos—many of the wide-ranging tunes encompass multiple shifts in feel—but it's not something Watkins highlights. He seems at his best in the medium-to-fast range.

—Jon Ross

One For Miles, One For Maynard: Shhh; Expecting You; Chala Nata; Contemplation; Sound Judgment; I Can't Help It; Full Sun; Hurdles. (44:20)

Personnel: Reggie Watkins, trombone; Matt Parker, Rick Matt, saxophones; Steve Hawk, Ian Gordon, trumpets; Howard Alexander III, piano; Jeff Grubbs, bass; David Throckmorton, drums; Carmelo Torres, percussion; Craig Arlet, guitar; Josh Moore, keyboards, programming.

Ordering info: reggiawatkinsmusic.com



Helio Parallax *Helio Parallax*

M.O.D. TECHNOLOGIES 0014

★★★★

There's a slippery, slithering slope that blends a jazz aesthetic with pop, rock, funk, hip-hop and reggae. Helio Parallax envelopes itself within this slope with distractingly pleasant results. The trio of multi-instrumentalists Takuya Nakamura, Josh Werner and Marihito Ayabe are joined by special guests throughout this disc of mostly instrumental music, though there are some tracks, like the delicate rocker "Strange Dream," featuring the loquacious, slightly otherworldly vocals of Dustan Louque.

Everything is inundated with some dicey reverb and an overall swimming sound mix—courtesy of Bill Laswell. One could listen to this CD as background music for a mind trip, or turn it on up and dance along. Check out "Kilgore Trout Dub" for an insistent backbeat and swirling recurrences that include unavoidable but very welcomed drumming.

The disc is an assortment of 12 originals by the trio, every tune laced with attitude, sometimes a tad tired or overwrought, but mostly filled with enough unpredictability to keep you listening for more unexpected musical variety. "Frank's Lament," for instance, could be all about Ol' Blues Eyes. Nakamura's plangent, wailing trumpet tone is bluesy and lament-like even as the song cradles itself around a slow-rocking groove. (Frank goes strolling.)

With all the programming onboard, Helio Parallax could be considered an ambient adventure. And yet, with all the swizzle sonic sticks splayed throughout, it's more ear candy than something to be mesmerized by. If you love electronics smartly produced and played, Helio Parallax is likely to please your sonically driven musical palette, not to mention your mysterious, delicious soul.

—John Ephland

Helio Parallax: Helio Parallax; Strange Dream; Another Broken Human; Kilgore Trout Dub; Soft Blind Pony Ride; Speed Of Life; Frank's Lament; Nocturne For Secret Planets; After The Flood; Happy Helio; City Of Glass; New Planet; Old Sun. (60:08)

Personnel: Takuya Nakamura, trumpet, organ, programming, horn arrangements; Josh Werner, bass, double bass, piano, guitar, programming, keys, vocals; Marihito Ayabe, dubbing mixing, programming; Bianca Casady, Dustan Louque, Jahdan Blakkamoore, vocals; Doug Wieselmann, Troy Simms, saxophones; Yoshio Kobayashi, Gintas Janusonis, drums; Raja Kassis, guitar; Namiko Ishikawa, backing vocals; Bill Laswell, dubbing.

Ordering info: mod-technologies.com