

will occasionally transform the sound of Clark's piano beyond recognition, Ormiston retains the compositional integrity of their improvisations.

Opening track "U" is a 23 second sketch, yet it acts as an overture for the whole album, with Clark taking a forensic ear to a short phrase, subtly modifying the spaces between notes. Ormiston double-tracks it, then casts the whole piece into a hall of mirrors. On "Bodies Labouring Hands Working" Ormiston goes all out, lowering a kinetic bassline into a mine shaft, and transforming a two-note piano figure into synthesized strings. Pedal and hammer sounds are spatialised in the right channel, while the piano melody is filtered and squished.

Ormiston's interventions on "Anemone As Alien" and "Hold Me" are more subtle, as she enhances Clark's reflective melodies and chordal figures with spatialisation, EQ and reverb. Her amplification of environmental sounds makes the pieces more intimate still. That tenderness and vulnerability extends to the final moments of "Hold Me", where the piano dissolves into fuzzy particles.

Stewart Smith

Ed Palermo Big Band

The Great Un-American Songbook, Volume 3: Run For Your Life

Sky Cat CD/DL

Ed Palermo is a wisecracking reedsman and arranger from New Jersey who, in his teens, bit hard on modern jazz and Frank Zappa – then managed to land a plum gig with Latin jazz maestro Tito Puente. Palermo's big band have been a constant of the New York jazz scene since the mid-1970s, and while album titles like *Take Your Clothes Off When You Dance* and *A Lousy Day In Harlem* imply a rich vein of musical satire, the music tends to smile inwardly rather than laugh in your face.

This third volume of Palermo's *Great Un-American Songbook* is built on the conceit that Donald Trump has so diminished the reputation of America that British pop is the only place left for American jazz musicians to go. Which gives Palermo an excuse to plunder the songbooks of The Beatles, Jethro Tull, The Moody Blues and Procol Harum.

If Palermo's ensemble – staffed by musicians like trumpeter Ronnie Buttacavoli, drummer Ray Marchica and tenor saxophonist Bill Straub – play like well-drilled pros who know their leader's idiom and quirks from the inside, this is because Palermo has maintained a remarkable consistency in personnel over the decades. When he runs Lennon & McCartney's "Come Together" in counterpoint with Zappa's "Chunga's Revenge" – which necessitates a tricky tempo lurch (and a brief reference to The Doors' "Light My Fire") – nobody breaks sweat. "Strawberry Fields Forever" is transformed into a feature for violinist Katie Jacoby, who luxuriates in working improvised lines against Palermo's

plush, citrusy orchestration; the opening track, The Beatles' "Within You Without You", uses an amplified sitar drone to invoke memoirs ofraga rock. The album winds up with Bruce McDaniel's rather straight-laced voice intoning "Nights In White Satin" and everything is immaculately scored and presented, very enjoyable too – but without risking that next level of complete reinvention like Mike Westbrook's *Off Abbey Road*, which yanked well known Beatles pieces apart and invited improvisors to run amok.

Philip Clark

Arash Pandi

Exotic Paradise

Zabte Sote DL/MC

Rojin Sharafi

Zangaar

Zabte Sote DL/MC

Zangaar is the second release from Iranian composer and sound designer Rojin Sharafi on experimental music label Zabte Sote. The album is an exciting hybrid of sound poetry, personal manifesto and storytelling peppered with flavours of folk, ambient and noise musics. There are two distinctive narratives running throughout *Zangaar*: one of human experience and the other an abstracted concept of time. Opening track "Bolor" teams Sharafi's layered vocals with a driving bassline and swooping oscillators, painting a picture of sea waves that part and twist like a magnet manipulating iron filings.

The delicately nuanced instruments and mutating vocals demonstrate Sharafi's skilful musical dexterity. "Ghaaf Kaaf Gaaf" plays with reverberant strings and angular electronic melodies. Skewed drums blur into sawing synths in "Pedarkoshi" while "Choruk" slowly meanders between delicately bowed and crisp pizzicato zithers. "Toom" immerses the audience in a wide-panned multitrack choir. This drifts into an echoing, hollow space, punctuated by the mechanical sound of piano hammers and trilling santours.

Arash Pandi's *Exotic Paradise* is an astute, sociopolitical critique of cultural heritage through both its conceptual narrative and experimental blend of electronic and acoustic sound worlds. Tracks are named after specific Dastgahs – the Iranian system of modes practised as tunes with melodic and rhythmical distinctions. Pandi cleverly blends generative algorithms with composed and improvised materials, creating a cloth woven with Persian rhythms and melodies. "Bayat Isfahan" builds delicate orchestral layers with a breath-like pulse. A synthesizer slowly transforms from subdued tone into an undeniable ecstasy in "Shur (Power Of Patience)" while a frightening corporeality, articulated by every colour of flame and blood, can be heard in the fires of "Dashti". The hyper Irani-pop beats of "Chargah" contrast with "the synthetic sound world of Dogah": chanting crowds, prayer and

radios transforming into an opaque wall of noise.

Pandi has infiltrated new artistic territory, reminiscent of Xenakis's polytopes, where the site-specific location is a cultural heritage accessed through an experienced synthetic sound world. Relaying a story of natural beauty, a devastating virus, political oppression and brutal violence, *Exotic Paradise* is absolutely stunning.

Mariam Rezaei

Ashley Paul

Ray

Slip DL/LP

In the notes accompanying *Ray*, Ashley Paul shares her experiences of lockdown. To cancel out the grim news happening outside, she'd reach for albums full of melody and humour. *Ray* reflects that need, with the songs capturing the joy of exploring the garden with her child, and the pain of missing friends and family. Back in May, Paul released *Window Flower*, a short album of playtime jams with her daughter Cora and partner Ben. Made under lockdown, it's a gem of DIY pop and kitchen sink groove. Some of its spirit and methodology seeps into *Ray*, which combines the vulnerability and openness of 2018's *Lost In Shadows* with a newfound warmth and playfulness.

Ray was recorded remotely, with Paul sending tracks to trusted collaborators Yoni Silver and Otto Willberg. The overdubbed arrangements are inspired, with Paul and Silver interweaving contrapuntal lines on alto saxophone and woody bass, anchored by Willberg's bass clarinet, by Willberg's woody bass. The trio further spice the broth with extended techniques. The opening instrumental "Star Over Sand" sets a modal jazz band loose in the garden, the bass clarinet snuffing in the bushes while the alto sax climbs a tree. It's all underpinned by the wonky funk of Paul's percussion, her groove closer to hip-hop than jazz. "Garden Walk" explores similar territory, its jazzy rambles moving to an ambulatory beat.

On "Blue Skies Green Trees", Paul's multitracked vocal melody is cushioned by clarinets and saxophones. The lyric juxtaposes haiku-like observations of her immediate environment with longing for absent friends. "Little Butterfly" is a disarmingly tender garden sketch, with Willberg's prepared bass clunks the grit in the oyster. By contrast, the stark voice and guitar of "Choices" sounds like The Pastels playing Nico. A gorgeous album, occupying a sweet spot between song and free improvisation.

Stewart Smith

J Pavone String Ensemble

Lost And Found

Astral Spirits CD/DL

Normally, a string quartet consists of two violins, a viola and a cello. The group heard on violinist and composer Jessica Pavone's latest album is not a traditional

string quartet, though. Rather, it is a four-piece string ensemble consisting of violinists Erica Dicker and Angela Morris, and Pavone and Abby Swidler (replacing Joanna Mattrey, who appeared on the group's 2019 debut *Brick And Mortar*) on violas.

The album's four pieces, all of which have similar titles – "Rise And Fall", "Nice And Easy", "Lost And Found", "Pros And Cons" – don't so much unfold as roll out like a heavy carpet gently pushed. "Rise And Fall" begins with one violin and one viola playing slow, complementary seesaw lines; when the third and fourth instruments join, they initially harmonise with the first two like feedback or an echo. The melodies have the simplicity of something a child might hum to themselves, alone in their room, and there's little elaboration; the long middle section of "Rise And Fall" is a series of steady sinewave-like tones, almost as if the instrumentalists are simultaneously tuning up and testing the strength of the strings by holding single notes for as long as possible.

The beginning of "Nice And Easy" has a strange hesitancy, like the players are nervous that they've played the wrong note; their bows seem to rise nervously off the strings, creating a fraying effect. As the piece goes on, the tones become even more uncertain and wavering, somewhere between whale song and "Maybe there's something wrong with your turntable...?" It certainly doesn't live up to its title – listening to it is almost nerve-racking, as it seems to be dissolving moment by moment.

The title piece, which closes the album, is also the longest on the record. Yet listening to it feels at first like entering a room in which time stands still; harmonics hover around you like clouds. At six minutes, though, there's a brief but consequential pause, as though the musicians lost their place and needed to regroup. Everything after is somehow richer and even more dreamlike.

Phil Freeman

Tristan Perich

Drift Multiply

New Amsterdam/Nonesuch CD/DL

The hum that opens the eighth section of Tristan Perich's *Drift Multiply* sounds like a recording of an electricity substation in a maritime location. Tidal wash ebbs and flows in the background. Dip into the following section, and you might think you were listening to an orchestral piece by John Adams. More frequently in the course of this ten-part work, the chamber ensemble music of Philip Glass and Steve Reich springs to mind. New Yorker Perich grew up listening to those composers and in his own music he shows no reluctance to acknowledge their influence upon his own taste and judgement. Such blatant echoes of precursors may deter some listeners, but Perich approaches composition from an angle that sets him apart. *Drift Multiply*

is certainly alluring; it is also satisfyingly thought-provoking.

The score specifies 50 violins, but also 50-channel electronics, allowing Perich to pursue his boundless fascination with the binary nature of 1-bit tones. Those are the kind of sounds that make alarm clocks so successful – the most basic of digital waveforms, stark tones that are simply either on or off. In this performance, recorded in Rotterdam in October 2019, they are generated by the composer's custom-built 50-output circuit board, live software relayed through a host of speakers, while massed violins are coordinated by Douglas Perkins. Well-known as an accomplished percussionist, Perkins has exactly the right sense of timing and accent to steer this precisely written music.

Although I have cited moments in *Drift Multiply* where either the low grade electronics, or the iridescent timbres and harmonic opulence of the classical instruments predominate, the teasing aspect of this work is its intimate blending of those components. The manner in which the historically sanctioned identity of the violin melds with the uncomplicated character and cultural anonymity of 1-bit tones might launch a whole raft of worthwhile questions. The nature of their interaction sheds light on the physics and mathematical realities which underlie music and its capacity to stimulate or move us. Often in that process *Drift Multiply* happens to be unapologetically beautiful. Julian Cowley

Pharaoh Overlord

6

Rocket CD/DL/LP

Tomi Leppänen and Jussi Lehtisalo formed Pharaoh Overlord with the intention of delving into musical areas not being explored by their main band Circle. But as both projects have evolved and grown, the aesthetic boundaries of each have also shifted and overlapped – in 2015, both bands released records named after the other, blurring the lines of demarcation and suggesting some parity of status, at least in the eyes of the artists. Their

Pharaoh Overlord



willingness to experiment with style and genre has kept Circle consistently engaging, but it's also ensured that Pharaoh Overlord are equally exciting, which is a bit like driving around in a Porsche with a bumper sticker that reads, "My other car is also a Porsche".

6 restrains the guitar overdrive that fuelled previous release 5, focusing instead on a precision built and dazzlingly burnished electronic pulse. It's over a minute into "Path Eternal" before the vocals begin; polished synthesizer textures reflect light like the soaring glass and steel of a futurist new build. But when we hear the brutal growls of Aaron Turner (Isis/Old Man Gloom) it's clear that the architects have summoned a demon to the mezzanine.

The juxtaposition of clean disco-fresh electronics against the abrasive and guttural vocals is exhilarating. There are instrumental moments during "Arms Of The Butcher" and "Tomorrow's Sun" that even recall the Scandinavian purity of Lindström or Todd Terje, but these are magnified in their effect when combined with Turner's roar. "Without Song All Will Perish" uses a victorious synth motif, raised alongside a solid four-square beat to register somewhere between epic call to arms and stark warning. In a climate where artists and those in creative industries are being shown such lack of respect by being told to abandon their vocation and retrain, it's an affecting message.

Spenser Tomson

PRAED Orchestra!

Live In Sharjah

Morphine DL/3xLP

On 3 November 2018 the place to be was Calligraphy Square in the heart of Sharjah, United Arab Emirates. That evening witnessed this premiere performance of a composition commissioned by the city's Arts Foundation. An ambitious suite in seven parts, blending hypnotic strands of Arabic popular music with heady electronics and elements of free jazz, it was conceived and developed by Paed Conca and Raed Yassin. Since 2006 they have worked together as PRAED, fusing their names while creating psychedelically oriented music for mind and body. The duo's adventures in trance have remained firmly rooted in shaabi, a style whose seductive rhythms are frequently heard gyrating through Egypt's urban streets. Fervish dancing and the ecstatic ceremonies of Sufi tradition have been another vital source of inspiration.

For this project it was decided that Conca's clarinet, electronics and bass, and Yassin's synthesizer, vocals and beats should be embedded within a sizeable ensemble. 11 musicians join them, from diverse backgrounds but all sharing the ability to interact as high spirited improvisors or to lock into a collective looping groove, as required. *The Last Invasion*, which opens the concert, is startling and unsettling. The naked

voice of Ute Wassermann executes an astonishing range of dramatic leaps and contortions. Organist Maurice Louca, harpist Christine Kazarian, saxophonist Hans Koch and the group's other reed players then join her to generate an air of menace and deep unease before the resilient plucked tones of Sam Shalabi's oud eventually take centre stage.

The mood then shifts and the partying begins. *Doomsday Survival Kit*, previously heard on PRAED's 2019 release of that name, throbs with defiant and affirmative energy in this orchestral version. Blissfully swirling and mesmeric music, driven by the electrifying combination of percussionist Khaled Yassine and drummer Michael Zerang, it seems to transcend any need for beginning or end. *Live In Sharjah* is episodic and its mood swings. Brooding reflection may follow sequences of near delirium. Yet all hangs together, whirling in the irresistible vortex of PRAED's psychedelic shaabi, revolving in the orbit of those sinuous and transporting rhythms.

Julian Cowley

Massimo Pupillo

The Black Iron Prison

Subsound DL/LP

Massimo Pupillo's practice is collaborative, as a rule – in fact, without exception until now. Even *The Black Iron Prison*, a long player comprising four glowering drone based pieces, found the Italian trekking to the West Wales studio of Thighpaulsandra, who partners Pupillo in URUK. The Subsound label, though, notes the "complete solitude" in which he recorded this album. It's just the second under his own name among a dozens-strong discography and a far more crepuscular affair than his best-known gig, bassist for jazz-punkers Zu.

A bass is present here, "heavily processed" (once again, the label's words) and indeed it's comprehensively melted into the mix of synth and electronics. There are no rhythms deployed, really, though a bout of backmasking might create a doomy, glitchy ticking amid fragmentary voices and lupine moans – and having eked that out for over 13 minutes, approaching dungeon synth levels of gloom-wallowing towards the end, why not title it "My Inaugural Address At The Great White Throne Judgement Of The Dead" for good measure? "Pistis Sophia" layers drones – some sounding dust-covered and organ-like, some high-pitched and unsettling – into some especially hermetic dark ambient fare, before "The Great Tribulation" shifts this mood into a quasi-industrial headspace with juddering machines and samples of dripping water. Its final two minutes (of 11 and a half) are fiercely minimal, faint bells and humming that sounds drawn from nature but probably wasn't.

The concluding title track is enlivened by vaguely grotesque effects which sound

like processed recordings of boots on heavy snow but, again, are likely electronic in origin. Inspired, as per the album title, by Philip K Dick's theories of perpetual psychic social control, these landscapes are stark enough to serve as a canvas for one's own emotional response, but may well evoke the feeling of walls closing in. Noel Gardner

Gwenifer Raymond

Strange Lights Over Garth Mountain

Tompkins Square CD/DL/LP

Sometimes the road you take really doesn't matter, as long as you get where you need to go. Gwenifer Raymond may have found her way to the blues via Nirvana's Lead Belly cover and some budget compilation CDs instead of canvassing African-American neighbourhoods for 78 rpm records, but she's still steeped in the right stuff. There wasn't much about her first album *You Were Never Much of A Dancer* that made it sound like it was the work of a Welsh millennial, but plenty of Americana-steeped themes casting dark shadows let you know that it was made by a person who had spent some quality time with the playing of Skip James, Dock Boggs and John Fahey.

Raymond seems to be starting to look beyond her record collection and into her own life on *Strange Lights Over Garth Mountain*. It's named for a UFO sighting that occurred near her childhood home, and the title tune uses dissonance and string-punishing force to evoke otherworldliness. Other compositions reference the Welsh language, Welsh circumstances and a dog she used to know. The manic pace of "Coal Train Down The Line" makes sense if you know that Raymond also drums in punk bands. "Marseilles Bunkhouse, 3am" sounds like a mash-up of the late Brazilian guitarist Bola Sete and Greek rembetika music, but it works at a conceptual level – when you're trying to convey the experience of sleeping far from home, it makes sense to draw emotional sustenance from the work of exiles. The last point indicates that Raymond has learned the most important lesson of American primitive guitar: whatever your influences, they need to project a bit of your emotional life. This, as much as her robust tone and nimble picking, is what makes Raymond sound like a guitarist with staying power.

Bill Meyer

Red Fiction

Visions Of The Void

Tzadik CD/DL

Red Fiction are the latest group of maximalist prodigious jazz skronkers to be assembled by Los Angeles multi-instrumentalist Jason Schimmel. A recent addition to Secret Chiefs 3 alongside founder member Trey Spruance, Schimmel's other entries on an endlessly sprawling musical family tree include Estradasphere, Orange Tulip Conspiracy,