

Jazz for lovers at any time of night or day

Colin Vallon's Le Vent; Billy Hart's One is the Other; Vijay Iyer's Mutations

BY JUAN RODRIGUEZ, SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE MARCH 14, 2014



Colin Vallon, at 32 the golden boy of the fervently inventive Swiss jazz scene, is a master of what is called "open jazz." (Photo courtesy of Colin Vallon)

Is there such a thing as amazing slowness? There is a calm, deliberate air about the single notes pianist Colin Vallon manages on his fourth album, *Le Vent* (ECM Records), released last week, that's rarely heard in jazz and dangerously close to languid (read: empty) New Age.

There are no complex clusters, no pyrotechnics. I've never heard an album whose pace is so slow that it could send you to sleep — in a good way — yet keeps you hanging on for the next note. Imagine a pond in a forest just after a rain, the raindrops sliding from the leaves above gradually etching shimmering circles in the water. It is more meditation than contemplation or exposition or problem solving. A mantra, if you will, minimalism taken to the nth degree. Yet these notes infiltrate the soul, leaving you humming — no, murmuring — the deep, resonant tones.

If producer Manfred Eicher describes ECM as "the most beautiful sound next to silence," the sense of infinite space in *Le Vent*, after 45 years of the label's excellence, is its quintessence. A wind that blows oh-so gently, never reaching the end. Surely a cliché, but the ebb and flow proves otherwise.

Vallon, at 32 the golden boy of the fervently inventive Swiss jazz scene, is a master of what is called “open jazz” — open spaces, open mind (unafraid to lean on his classical background) and perhaps *Open, To Love*, the groundbreaking 1970 album by Montreal pianist Paul Bley, one of its stylistic giants.

Le Vent also sees Vallon extend Bill Evans’s concept, developed more than 50 years ago, of integrating ostensible “sidemen” — bassist Patrice Moret and drummer Julian Sartorius (who’s issued a 12-LP *Beat Diary* of solo percussion investigations) — by setting them free to comment. Moret offers dulcet bass notes, rather than vamps, at slightly off-kilter places, while Sartorius plays mainly muted splashy cymbals, occasionally scraping them for haunting high-pitched sounds, and using the rest of his kit sparingly.

Le Vent will appeal to those who like to let go and concentrate, a Zen-like contradiction that pays huge dividends. Oh yes, I should mention it’s great background music, too, for lovers at any time of night or day.

One Is the Other — a succinct definition of jazz — is the title of 73-year-old drummer Billy Hart’s second quartet recording for ECM, and it reflects his experience supporting many of the greats (Miles Davis, Wes Montgomery, Pharoah Sanders, Stan Getz, Herbie Hancock, Charles Lloyd). The band’s premise is that Hart gets to play anything he wants. Call it inspiration, or humility among the younger musicians, but serving Hart also propels the band to soaring flights of fancy.

This album is a textbook example on the meaning of musical empathy — something that no textbook can teach (it’s a spiritual thing). You could say that subtlety and nuance — call it collective wisdom from smooth operators — are hallmarks of this album, yet the album positively sparkles with creativity. Hart’s drum solos burst with melodies triggered by rhythmic sway.

Pianist Ethan Iverson — mainly known for the hard rocking *The Bad Plus* and his exceptionally provocative blog (dothemath.blogspot.com) — is a constant delight. Saxophonist Mark Turner’s profound good taste (accent on profound) impressed me in the early ’90s when he played a duet date with Kurt Rosenwinkel at *Upstairs* (I first heard him on record with Brad Mehldau) and he’s stayed true to his style. A quiet complexity, sinuous studiousness, informs his playing — sort of a cross between the cool of Wayne Marsh and the fire of early Coltrane — not to mention a whole lot of soul. Ben Street, one of the most in-demand young bassists, is the glue that gently binds.

This album’s breadth is reflected in *Yard* and *Sonnet for Stevie*, inspired by Charlie Parker and Stevie Wonder respectively. Indeed, the whole album could be called *I Just Called to Say I Love You* — the “you” being jazz itself. Totally simpatico.

Pianist Vijay Iyer describes *Mutations*, a 10-part piece comprised of “kernels or cells,” as his idea of “evolution as a dynamic, noisy interaction between a species and innumerable, competing, fluctuating environmental factors ...”

Iyer, a second-generation Indian-American, doesn’t mind intellectualizing. He has been recording since 1995 (most notably on the ACT label), and *Mutations* is his first album since he won the MacArthur “genius” grant and a Harvard teaching job, and his first work for ECM.

Iyer, 42, seems to have found a true home in the label’s dedication to sound quality and unique musical

hybrids: this album presents interfaces between piano, string quartet and electronics — a combination that seems to span history and becomes timeless — and charts the relationships between composition and improvisation. Above all, I was struck by how “new” Mutations sounds; I’ve never heard anything remotely like it. As such, it demands attentive listening; the reward is endless fascination. Like magic.

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