

Northern Spy Records

by Paul Acquaro

For Brooklyn based Northern Spy Records, running a label is not simply putting out recordings, it's about making connections. Founders Tom Abbs and Adam Downey previously worked with the historic ESP-Disk; after the label restarted in the early aughts, Abbs, 42 and Downey, 32, were at the helm of picking up the pieces and steering it new a direction. However, in 2010 an acrimonious split galvanized their decision to start Northern Spy and they saw their mission clearly.

Drawing upon experience and deep connections to the underground music scene in New York City, including both avant garde jazz and downtown NYC rock musicians (Abbs is an active musician who has played with many free jazz greats), they noticed a disconnect between the dependable but small avant garde jazz record buying audience and younger adventurous rock listeners. More importantly, they sensed a connection between the audiences and decided to be the ones to help bridge it. "Northern Spy was really founded on the idea that labels don't have to be so narrow and just concentrate on one genre," explains Abbs. "That people have diverse artistic interests throughout their lives and don't just listen to one style. That a catalogue can be a gateway to music that people might not have ever considered. That is what we look for everyday; art that pushes boundaries."

So far, the label is living up to the mission. On the

avant-jazz side, the label has put out recordings by Marc Ribot's Ceramic Dog, John Butcher, Arto Lindsay, Charles Gayle Trio, Gary Lucas, The Necks, Chicago Underground Duo, Gerald Cleaver's Black Host and Home of Easy Credit—just to name a few. Abbs adds, "And we get a lot of bigger rock guys that want to do improv records." A J. Spaceman and Kid Millions LP was released on Record Store Day and in the works are improvisational rock albums from both Thurston Moore and Sean Lennon. Abbs explains, "We do about 50% instrumental music and 50% bands with vocals. We're looking for stuff that we haven't heard before. Something with some sort of progressiveness, be it in style, lyrical content or politically."

It can be said that 2014 is much different media landscape than the free jazz scene of yore and the labels of rock and free jazz blend more seamlessly; however, it's also common lore that the Internet and streaming services have upended a dependable system. So, what does that mean to an upstart label like Northern Spy? Has the work running a label changed much? Says Abbs, "I don't think things have changed at all really except you have to hustle more cause the industry is generally down... When you put a record out with a label you have a whole team of people working the record. Who will do PR? Who will pay for the manufacturing and marketing? Comparing Bandcamp or anything self-released to having real international distributor relationships is apples and oranges."

Their office is located in a building that also houses the music venue Trans Pecos. The label runs a series of performances that Abbs says helps the label try out

bands. In addition, the group has run the Spy Festival, which celebrated its third year in 2013 and has included label bands such as the electro-acoustic jazz group Chicago Underground Duo (who just released their second album *Locus*) and the soulful Ava Luna. They are also currently putting together a CMJ showcase.

Promotion is a huge part of the label's offering and they have even formed another part of the company called Clandestine. They promote Northern Spy artists, as well as a roster of other artists and labels. Abbs explains, "Adam and I have done PR for over 100 albums between ESP, Northern Spy and people started to come to us because they saw all the coverage we were getting." He adds, "We have a really great time-tested system for marketing albums so it was not a big deal to upscale and begin taking on clients. Soon our PR clients were asking for distro and our distro clients were asking for PR so it all came together."

Tom Blancarte, bassist of experimental jazz duo The Home of Easy Credit" he has with his wife Louise Dam Eckardt Jensen (electronics and woodwinds) concurs. "Most of the perks came when we first released the eponymous album," he explains. "Northern Spy helped us to book a huge tour of the US and had a team of interns helping with everything from flyers to radio promotion. And of course it's always nice to be associated with all of the great bands on the label." Blancarte sees the diversity of the label as a real strength as well, "I like that they aren't as narrow in their scope as most labels tend to be. When I was first discovering the wide world of music, I would

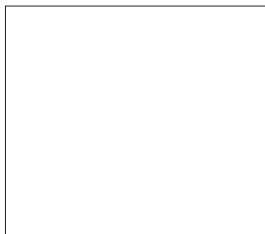
(CONTINUED ON PAGE 50)



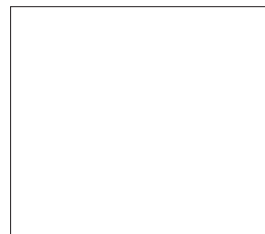
Ungrund
Gábor Gadó Quartet with Dave Liebman



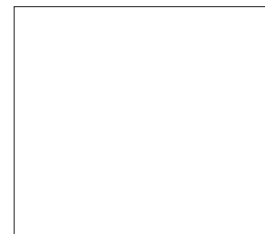
Hungarian Jazz Rhapsody
Mihály Borbély Quartet



Live at Miipa
Lakatos/Potter/Veal/Carrington



Flat / Sikkvidék
Grencsó Open Collective



Vanga
Grzegorz Kamas Trio Feat. Miklós Lukács

LISTEN UP!

BEN HOLMES is a trumpeter based in Brooklyn. He enjoys music from many points in time and space with special affinity for jazz and traditional music from Eastern Europe. His own projects are driven by interplay between improvisation and composition, drawing on jazz, traditional music and classical techniques. He has released two albums as a leader: 2012's *Anvil of the Lord* and 2009's *Ben Holmes Trio*. He also released duo records with accordionist Patrick Farrell (2014's *Gold Dust* and 2011's *EP*) and a self-titled record with the klezmer ensemble Tarras Band.

Teachers: Laurie Frink, Terry Szor, Paul Caputo, Ralph Alessi, Bob Gravener, Jane Dunnick.

Influences: Booker Little, Timofei Dokshizer, Elvis Ajdinovic, Dave Tarras, Louis Armstrong, Don Cherry, Teddy Wilson, Peter Sokolow and so many more.

Current Projects: My quartet with Curtis Hasselbring, Matt Pavolka, Vinnie Sperrazza; Trio Blastphemy with Marcus Rojas and Curtis Hasselbring; Ben Holmes/Patrick Farrell; Tarras Band; Erik Satie Quartet.

By Day: Practice, teach, run, eat, read, etc.

I knew I wanted to be a musician when... I heard Lester Young play "I've Found a New Baby" with Nat King Cole and Buddy Rich.

Dream Band: My dream is that every band listed in

"Current Projects" will perform regularly enough to explore our full potential. Or to play quartet with Teddy Wilson, Papa Jo Jones and Al Lucas (aka the band on *The Impeccable Mr. Wilson*).

Did you know? I used to give NYU undergrads non-therapeutic electrical shocks and operate a brain scanner.

For more information, visit ben-holmes.com. Holmes is at City Winery Sep. 7th and Barbès Sep. 12th, both with Trio Blastphemy, and Greenwich House Music School Sep. 25th with Patrick Farrell. See Calendar.



Ben Holmes



Dominic Fragman

DOMINIC FRAGMAN is a percussionist and perpetual student of the arts. He was involved in the production of Paul F. Murphy and Larry Willis' latest album, *Foundations*, and authored an entry on Murphy for the *Grove Dictionary of American Music*.

Teachers: I have studied extensively with Paul Murphy.

He has transformed my playing and helped me gain new perspectives through the Seven Liberal Arts. Since moving to Manhattan, I have studied with Cecil Taylor.

Influences: I draw as much from the great drummers as from Beethoven and Brahms, Charlie Parker and John Coltrane, Rudolph Nureyev and Katherine Dunham, da Vinci and Dalí, Giza and Calatrava, the Earth and the stars.

Current Projects: I am excited to work with saxophonist James Brandon Lewis. We will be doing a European tour this fall and just recorded a tribute to Amiri Baraka led by Thomas Sayers Ellis. This winter I am recording with Murphy and Willis for their new release!

By Day: Practice, meditation, outreach.

I knew I wanted to be a musician when... the first time I touched an instrument.

Dream Band: Beethoven, Monk, Johnny Hodges, Jimmy Lyons, Segovia, Jimi Hendrix, L. Shankar and Toumani Diabate.

Did you know? I was recently part of a sound production crew for Mobb Deep.

For more information, visit dominicfragman.com. Fragman is at Downtown Music Gallery Sep. 21st with James Brandon Lewis. See Calendar.

(INTERVIEW CONTINUED FROM PAGE 6)

JT: Stan Getz came, Sonny Stitt came, Miles Davis came, Dizzy came. I got very friendly with Eric Dolphy.

TNYCJR: How did you end up replacing Harry Carney in the Ellington band in 1974?

JT: When Harry died, John Gensel, who was the pastor at the Lutheran church at 54th Street and Lexington Avenue, asked me to play at Harry's funeral. Duke Ellington used to call John the shepherd of the night flock and I played "Sophisticated Lady" at Harry's funeral because that was Harry's solo. Mercer Ellington offered me the job and the next thing I knew, I was on the bus going through the Lincoln Tunnel with the Ellington band for six weeks of one-nighters.

TNYCJR: You also played with Buddy Rich's band.

JT: I called him Bloody Rich. We had a pick-up band out of New York and we had a saxophone section of Sal Nistico, Joe Romano, Lew Tabackin and Eddie Daniels. We went to Canada for five nights. I wasn't a regular member of the band, though. I was just subbing.

TNYCJR: How often did you hear Buddy Rich berating and screaming at the permanent members of the band?

JT: After every set. He used to get the band in the band room and curse them out: oh, you all are just a bunch of no-playing motherfuckers. Things like that. He would say terrible things to them like, "I've got a band coming in from L.A. tomorrow that will cut you to ribbons." Buddy wanted me to go in the band, but I wouldn't go in the band. I didn't want to live like that. Touring is hard enough without getting a lecture after every set. But Buddy sure could play the drums.

TNYCJR: Do you have plans to record in the near future?

JT: I would like to do a ballad album. I'll probably get around to it. I'd like to do an album of Ellington and Strayhorn. I went out with Billy Strayhorn one night in London—Billy and Harry Carney and me. We were in the Dorchester Hotel. Billy was drinking gin and tonic in a pint glass. Half a pint of gin and half a pint of tonic—and he had about three of them. Billy liked to drink.

TNYCJR: You've been with the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra for 26 years now.

JT: Oh, Wynton Marsalis is amazing. He gets the best sound from the trumpet. He can get a beautiful sound without playing loud. A lot of trumpet players are very loud, but Wynton is not like that. Wynton is a wonderful person. He's been so great with me. I've enjoyed working with Wynton. I've enjoyed everything here in New York. I've had a marvelous career here. Absolutely wonderful career. ❖

For more information, visit jalc.org/meet-the-orchestra/joe-temperley. Temperley is at Dizzy's Club Sep. 5th-7th and Rose Theater Sep. 18th-20th with Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra. See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Buck Clayton/Humphrey Lyttelton—*Buck Clayton With Humphrey Lyttelton and His Band (Me and Buck)* (World Record Club, 1963)
- Duke Ellington Orchestra—*Continuum* (Fantasy, 1974-75)
- Benny Waters—*When You're Smiling* (Hep Jazz, 1980)
- Joe Temperley—*Concerto For Joe* (Hep Jazz, 1993-94)
- Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra—*Plays the Music of Duke Ellington* (DMX Music, 1999-2003)
- Joe Temperley—*A Portrait* (Hep Jazz, 2006)

(LABEL CONTINUED FROM PAGE 12)

use labels to find new names to try out. I like that someone might be listening to the Zs and then stumble upon John Butcher through the label. Or us!"

Speaking of John Butcher, the saxophonist released the solo effort *Bell Trove Spools* on the label a couple years ago. The album was recorded partially at the Issue Project Room in Brooklyn, where the resonance of the room was integral to the recording. "I thought it'd be good to put it out on a local label," says Butcher, "It all went very smoothly. They gave me full control on the content." Butcher has an album coming out in November with guitarist Fred Frith. "They were the first label I approached, as I thought it would be a good fit—and I appreciated the enthusiasm and energy they put into their release," said Butcher.

Beyond releasing albums, promoting artists and running events, the label and Abbs also run a non-profit called Jump-Arts, which helps support artists, runs educational workshops for developmentally disabled youth and is also at work on building a camp in the Catskill Mountains.

Finally, what about the label's name? Abbs downplays any real meaning, it being just one of 50 ideas that they had. However, he explains, "personally it has meaning for me because I had family that fought in the Civil War out of Wisconsin. I definitely like the idea of a "northern spy" on clandestine missions to enlighten the masses. If you look at underground music as a whole it is really like this secret world that only music nerds know about. We try to cultivate the idea that when you listen to a Northern Spy record, you are getting let into this secret world. Positioning ourselves as taste makers." And really, what does a spy do besides make connections? ❖

For more information, visit northernspyrecords.com. Artists performing this month include Gerald Cleaver at ShapeShifter Lab Sep. 19th with Jason Rigby, Children's Magical Garden Sep. 22nd and Ibeam Brooklyn Sep. 23rd with Jonathan Saraga; Tom Blancarte at Freddy's Backroom Sep. 23rd and JACK Sep. 26th-28th with Peter Evans; Chad Taylor at The Jazz Gallery Sep. 26th with Eric Revis; and Marc Ribot at Town Hall Sep. 27th as part of *Strange & Beautiful: The Music & Art of John Lurie*. See Calendar.

(AGOSTO CONTINUED FROM PAGE 13)

to play in other groups and with such deeply deliberate players it was one of the most sublime sets of the fest. The first 20 minutes had Frith and Léandre giving each other nothing but space, Drake supporting both at once, until Léandre began a possessed sort of chant and they fell into something dark and slightly Celtic. A wonderful bowed bass solo followed with Frith playing percussively on his guitar laid flat on his lap and a dual arco section featured Drake delivering fast cymbal work and Frith's pedals and objects taking his instrument far from the realm of guitar.

Without a doubt the strangest assemblage on the program was Frantz Hautzinger's Big Rain. It was impossible to imagine what the odd amalgam of Haino, Drake, bassist Jamaaladeen Tacuma and the leader on trumpet and effects might be. Drake, again, expertly played both sides of the fence, but the fence was taller this time. On one side was someone who never riffs and on the other someone incapable of not riffing. To their right was a bandleader who called the proceedings together as his own personal, doped-up *Bitches Brew*. It took a full hour for them to find a kind of funky R&B ballad and for the time a common wavelength. They built an enormous group sound and brought it back down again rather perfectly then stayed down for a long time without relenting to the close that was right in front of them, then started ramping up again. It was almost comedic by the end and nearly perfect.

Frith's third appearance at the festival was in MMM, led by Léandre and with Alvin Curran on piano and synthesizer and Urs Leimgruber on saxophones. The group released an excellent disc on Leo Records in 2012 and stood up to that standard with a morass of abstract groupthink where the commonalities crafted were defined by the ability to change together into new abstractions. The acoustic instruments were often reframed by Curran's electronics, at times sampling Léandre's voice and employing a bank of chants from his synth. Frith did a fair bit of mimicry, clearly enjoying himself and Leimgruber's subtle playing was often felt as much as heard.

Ducret's Real Thing #3—with four trombonists, a pianist and a percussionist—took the ribbon for best in fest. The set began with a rhythmic trio of guitar, piano and an impressive display of vibes, bells and gongs. As the horns came in and the music built, they played strict syncopations and bright fanfares, graceful at some times at others a bit like a mad calliope, based on the writings of Nabakov in structure but musically bridging a logical gap between Olivier Messiaen and Henry Threadgill.

The Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation grounds, where the festival is held, are a pleasure to be in and a grand setting for a closing party, which the Lisbon Underground Music Ensemble brought on the final night. The energetic 15-piece band played taut arrangements, propelled by solid drumming, heavy electric bass and reed and horn parts that often seemed to flock like sparrows around the park and swarm upon the themes written by leader Marco Barroso, who jumped between piano and conductor's position. It was a fitting end to an enjoyable, cerebral festival. ❖

For more information, visit musica.gulbenkian.pt/jazz

MYRIAD3
THE WHERE

Myriad3's mind-blowing sophomore release."
-Dan Bilawsky, *All About Jazz*

"Myriad3 is cutting edge, the future of modern jazz."
-Brent Black, *Critical Jazz*

"This is a great modern jazz album that gets deeper each time you listen to it."
-Steve Marlow, *Earshot*

Myriad3 exploded onto the international jazz scene with the release of their debut album, "Tell", in late 2012. Their new album due Sept 2, "The Where", expands on the trio's eclectic musical tastes and showcases a group compelled to experiment and innovate, not rest on their laurels.

ALMA Records
Smalls Jazz Club
NYC Sept 7
4:30pm
almarecords.com
myriad3.com
e one