

## A Year, 2020 Specifically, In Jazz

By Kim Kleinman, Contributing Writer

Comes December and once again I have the chance to wrap up the year with reflections on what I heard. Even after another year of happy immersion in the music, I don't have sufficient awareness of what specifically has come out in 2020 to make a list of essential exciting music. There's no list to check twice. I'm better connected to the scene—and even have a couple of favorites—but my historian genes kick in and I listen for trends and antecedents rather than being focused solely on this moment.

So, herewith my reflections on two albums whose release I anticipated affectionately, but also the impact of streaming during the pandemic and a paean to the alto saxophone.

I looked forward and absorbed the Artemis album. There are some nifty tunes—Allison Miller's "Goddess of the Hunt," Anat Cohen's "Nocturno," Renee Rosnes's "Big Top," and her arrangement of Lee Morgan's "The Sidewinder" serving as a reference point to show what the band's capable of. I recognize that all-star ensembles mesh in varying ways and Artemis is nicely cohesive and collaborative but unevenness is inevitable, maybe making it not quite an album-of-the-year candidate. But these are mighty players whose work I've enjoyed in person and on record. Miller is an exemplar of the drummers whose every strike is carefully calculated for both rhythmic and sonic impact. I can think of no one more joyous in her playing than Cohen. Melissa Aldana has a grasp of her horn's history and has an innovative approach to the tenor/bass/drums trio. Ingrid Jensen's tribute to Kenny Wheeler with Steve Tressler opened my ears to that giant of the music. Rosnes has the veteran's insider/outsider savvy to lead this entourage. They've made a great start that will grow as they have more experience together.

Fred Hersch's "Songs from Home" also stands out for me. I followed closely his Facebook Live "Tune of the Day" series in April and May and therefore I feel like I got to see the album in development. It had to have been a daunting task for him to have something daily for 6 or 7 weeks, but it was the two-way gift of music. He got to play and we got to listen; together we tried to figure out how to maintain audience when we couldn't/shouldn't breathe the same air, literally. Songs from Home is a very homemade project—literally from his living room, probably from a smart phone/tablet as the images were as in a mirror. The relatively low-tech makes it heartfelt and intimate, including articulate explanations of why those tunes stood out. We (Hersch, Fritz, and I) are of an age, so what he does with the radio songs of our youth is homey and comforting —"When I'm Sixty-Four" (there but new), "All I Want" (getting inside Joni Mitchell's poignancy), and "Wichita Lineman" (no kitsch and full recognition of just what Jimmy Webb could do). His choices from the canon (a Kenny Wheeler composition, show tunes ("Wouldn't It Be Lovely" emerges from its components with close listening, and one of his own) are fresh and revealing.

That Hersch's album arose from a streaming "Tune of the Day" and then was showcased on a streaming show from the Village Vanguard in November highlights what I think is the most exciting development in jazz—that through streaming platforms the music is getting out to the world in ways it never has. A welcome swallow of lemonade from the bushels and bushels that have come our way. Put simply, from St. Louis, I can be the footloose jazz fan I have dreamed of being since beginning to read the front section of the New Yorker or the New York Times Arts and Leisure section nearly fifty years ago. I'm seeing three or more sets a week and having to choose among options. I am seeing players who I could only hope would make it to Jazz St Louis or the Sheldon Concert Hall (Omer Avital, Jon Irabagon, Dave Holland, Mark Turner) or discovering people whose music I should know better (Kenny Werner, Chris Potter, Miguel Zenon) or new artists I feel like I'm getting in on the ground floor with (Miki Yamanaka). There are folks whom I know I wouldn't see without this opportunity (Trio 3, George Coleman) and others who I check up regularly on just because I can (Cyrus Chestnut, Melissa Aldana). And Fritz and I can see shows "together" in real time, share our reactions, and enrich our nearly fifty-year shared exploration of the music.

There is a welcome de-romanticization too. The rooms, though large in legend, are cozy (the Vanguard seats 120, Mezzrow's—evocative of Bradley's where we saw Jimmy Rowles in the late 1970s—30. Jazz St. Louis with 200 is big; the Blue Note is now 250 and is a part of a chain and has a Times Square web presence but still good, adventurous music). The musicians are craftsmen in both senses—highly skilled members of the guild, but also jobbers. When they make it to St. Louis, it is special and planned; in New York it can be "hey, can you make a gig?" As a budding regular, I too am often enough just at a favorite haunt catching whatever is offered because I trust the curation of the club.

Each club has its niche. The Vanguard is The Vanguard, a pinnacle and, now, technically easy with its streams. Small's is for up and comers, but it has a deep archive, for one can see big names when they were coming up or just looking for a little gig to try things out. The Blue Note is top drawer but slightly garish compared to the staid Vanguard. Smoke is less adventurous but reliably swinging, familiar like a cheeseburger. The Jazz Gallery has a nice edge while serving the community with jams and showcases. I participated in a conversation between Miguel Zenon and Melissa Aldana and got to be a fan with a chat stream exchange with Aldana wherein I got to ask her about playing in sax/bass/drum trios.

When we come out the other end, I suspect and hope that shows will stream even when the punters are back in the room. I miss live music, but this is almost as good and much more accessible through these streams.

2020 was centenary of Charlie Parker's birth and the year that Lee Konitz died. Both

events warranted attention and reflection, but they also forced me to confront a prejudice I have against the alto saxophone. Sure, Johnny Hodges, Eric Dolphy, and Arthur Blythe are longstanding parts of my musical vocabulary. But I've also been in agreement with young Melissa Aldana who got her parents to replace the starter alto with a real horn, a tenor.

That was oh so wrong of me. We spent several Jazz Spectrum shows looking forward and back from Parker to see what he did to the alto and the music in general. Lee Konitz rose mightily in my estimation ("Motion," the gigantic "The Song is You" on "Lone-lee") as endlessly inventive in a way that didn't require bebop, a contrafactual of the highest order.

Here's an alternate history to consider—Charlie Parker doesn't happen and jazz becomes modern with Lee Konitz as the beacon. Miles Davis who wanted Konitz on *Birth of the Cool* comes to New York from East St. Louis to play with Konitz. How does that play out?

Still I could have come out of 2020 without recognizing the alto as a wonderful vehicle for making jazz. It has a full middle range that doesn't need to growl and can go high without a tenor's falsetto. Together those qualities open up a fluid middle that makes for nimble dances.

Streaming too has made it possible to find and appreciate those who are doing the work.

Miguel Zenon is at the top of the list. I saw him with Fred Hersch from the Vanguard and a Facebook stream shot at the Jazz Gallery playing Puerto Rican boleros with Luis Perdomo. The boleros are endlessly varied, mid-tempo dances (do not think Ravel, though there's a connection) with a meditative mournfulness. I bet when Miles Davis heard Spanish music for the first time, he appreciated similar possibilities that he—and not I—could act on and synthesize. Zenon, particularly there, has a wonderful tone and unrushed fluidity.

I saw Jaleel Shaw in his own band and later with Dave Holland and he too is a favorite for reasons similar to Zenon. Vincent Herring is a Smoke type whom I saw in a Cannonball tribute with Louis Hayes and then with his own swinging band, again showing the advantages of the nimbleness. Immanuel Wilkins is young and promising; I saw him with Kenny Barron in mid-December. He's not yet polished and elegant enough, but Barron's influence will pay off and Barron's tutelage is warranted. I am combing the Small's archive for these players and others.

Another bit of provincialism falls away and I have bigger ears. If I am a member of the New York club scene in this streaming way, then maybe I'll be enough ahead of the curve to have some 2021 albums to recommend. I don't have Fritz's weekly challenge of putting together shows, but I'm glad to help and continue to see where the music takes us.