



Manuel Mengis Gruppe 6: biting and uplifting

Rolling Out Left Field hatOLOGY

For the past 35 years, Swiss label hatOLOGY (or hat hut) has built an impressive catalogue with, for the most part, a focus on left-of-center musicians, which has not prevented owner/producer Werner X. Uehlinger from championing artists in a wide array of jazz sub-genres, as can attest a recent batch of new releases and reissues.

Originally released in 1995, *Constellations* (hatOLOGY 666; 58:58 ★★★★★½) remains a highlight in trumpeter Dave Douglas' output and arguably the best session recorded by his Tiny Bell Trio with Brad Shepik on guitar and Jim Black on drums. The inexhaustible imagination and dazzling skills of the musicians command attention at all times. Borrowing as much from jazz as from European folk or classical music, their eclectic program emphasizes the trio's depth and strikes a challenging balance between humor and earnestness.

In the past decade, pianist Marc Copland has generated quite a bit of interest that has resulted in a flurry of recordings. *Haunted Heart* (hatOLOGY 690; 65:56 ★★★) is a trio date led by Copland with Drew Gress on bass and drummer Jochen Rueckert. Ironically, the highlights are three strategically placed solo piano interpretations of "My Favorite Things": beautiful and eerie versions that are well-worth hearing. Elsewhere, the group tackles ballads, mostly standards that bear Copland's unique patina and display remarkable and tasteful craftsmanship but it ultimately fails to break the monotony created by the program's single focus.

Standards are also at the core of *A Memory Of Vienna* (hatOLOGY 687; 55:40 ★★), an anything-but-memorable effort that documents the meeting of two great idiosyncratic jazz voices, pianist Ran Blake and reed player Anthony Braxton. Unfortunately, the end result comes nowhere near the level of expectation such an event usually raises. Braxton's phrasing is sharp and Blake's performance is at his most extroverted, but their conversation falls short of delivering sparks, which is all the more detrimental because of how familiar the mate-

rial they have chosen to cover is. This session will not be remembered as a milestone in either musician's career—by a long shot.

On *Lacy Pool* (hatOLOGY 677; 50:15 ★★★½), an intriguing lineup (piano-trombone-drums) revisits what might one day become standards—10 compositions penned by Steve Lacy. Pianist Uwe Oberg's angular lines, Christof Thewes' soaring trombone and drummer Michael Griener's clever support help bring out the joy that inhabits those pieces. Their truculent nods at Dixieland or Thelonious Monk are a reminder of how both influences informed the late soprano sax player's musical development. They never get lost in a meditative state, because Oberg and company's mood is definitely more celebratory than mournful. To sum up, this is an excellent addition to the recent tributes paid to Lacy's legacy that will surely inspire more generations to come.

The final two offerings provide opportunities to leave one's comfort zone. Young Swiss trumpet player Manuel Mengis fronts his band Gruppe 6 with gusto on *Dulcet Crush* (hatOLOGY 684; 52:02 ★★★★★). Relying on rock beats, a dense front line and a biting guitar, the leader writes uplifting tunes that feature complex, intertwined and lush voicings. The ensemble passages are just as enthralling as the individual contributions of Mengis' dedicated and most sympathetic cohorts. There is hardly a dull moment on this thoroughly enjoyable affair that can be considered as high-quality entertainment.

Are You Going To Stop...In Bern? (hatOLOGY 686; 48:46 ★★★½) pairs two experimental guitarists from two different generations, Loren Connors and Jim O'Rourke. They engage in a constructive dialog that is mostly subdued, and pensive. Each piece segues into the next to form a suite-like composition, and the results are surprisingly easy to apprehend, as the two axemen are able to lay out more than one pretty melody. They do not offer enough substance to encourage further investigations.

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