

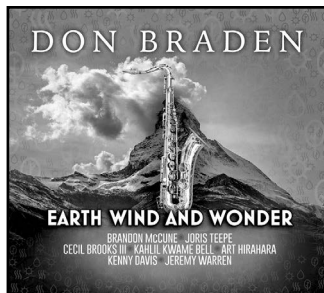
The Leadbelly Project
Adam Nussbaum (Sunnyside)
 by Mark Keresman

It's no secret blues is the basis for much American music. While sharp-dressed cats such as B.B. King and Buddy Guy get lots of well-deserved credit, it was the unplugged performers who laid the groundwork. One such figure is Huddie Ledbetter, aka Leadbelly (1888-1949). Some consider him a folksinger (folk standard "Goodnight Irene" is his), others a blues singer. Let the pundits hash it out—Leadbelly remains a crucial figure in American music who impacted electric blues, folk, rock 'n' roll and country. Drummer Adam Nussbaum—heard with John Abercrombie, Gil Evans, Ted Curson, Steve Swallow, Mike Stern and many others—has fashioned a super-fine tribute to the songs and influence of Leadbelly (plus a couple of originals).

If one is expecting standard blues chord progressions, searing instrumental soloing and/or classic songs presented earnestly, one might be disappointed. Superficially *The Leadbelly Project* brings to mind the electro-acoustic Americana of Bill Frisell. The tone of the guitars is blurry and slightly ethereal yet charged with earthy country twang and bent blues notes. The stately saxophone of Ohad Talmor has a blues-flavored feel much of the time but is still light and translucent. Nussbaum evokes slightly the style of former Frisell employer Paul Motian in that he's more of an impressionist than timekeeper. But while he doesn't stir up a storm, Nussbaum has got that beat, swing 'n' sway and makes with compelling crackle when the context calls for it. Take "Black Betty", wherein Nussbaum lays down a New Orleans-type rhythmic pattern halfway between a shuffle and a march tempo while guitarists Nate Radley and Steve Cardenas engage in sprightly yet pointed exchanges and velvety-smooth saxophone sings out a jabbing melodic line. "Black Girl" shows via contrasting guitars (terse, worried notes, judicious twang) the overlap between blues and country.

All tracks are eminently tuneful and relatively short (between three and five minutes) and the soloing is to the point. This is an example of what a great tribute album/band should be—communicating the essence of the tributee while performing the subject's works in refreshing ways.

For more information, visit sunnysiderecords.com



Earth, Wind and Wonder
Don Braden (Creative Perspective Music)
 by Phil Freeman

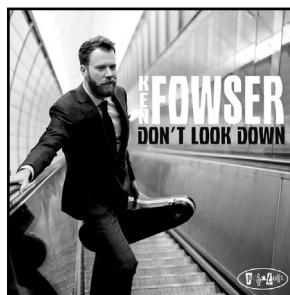
During R&B's golden era, bands like Earth, Wind & Fire (EWF), Kool & The Gang, Ohio Players and others, as well as brilliant composers and arrangers like Stevie Wonder, Isaac Hayes and Marvin Gaye, created an expansive sonic palette blending jazz, funk, soul, rock and—in the case of Wonder and EWF—Brazilian and

African music into songs as lush and intricate as they were hard-driving and funky. This was music that rewarded headphone listening every bit as much as it pushed people onto the dance floor. Saxophonist Don Braden, a veteran with over 20 albums to his name as a leader and a long career as a jazz educator at the Connecticut-based Litchfield Jazz Camp, New Jersey Performing Arts Center's Jazz for Teens program and many other schools and institutions, tackles some of these classic tunes on his latest release.

The music on *Earth, Wind & Wonder* was recorded in two sessions: one in 2014 and another three years later. In between, Braden underwent surgery for a cyst in his jaw, which very nearly cost him his ability to play. The fact that it's impossible to tell, without looking at the liner notes, which tracks were recorded in 2014 and which in 2017 is a testament to the success of the operation and to his talent and skill. The album—on which he's backed first by pianist Brandon McCune, bassist Joris Teepe and drummer Cecil Brooks III and later by pianist Art Hirahara, bassist Kenny Davis and drummer Jeremy Warren; Kahlil Kwame Bell adds percussion overdubs—includes versions of instantly recognizable tunes like "Fantasy", "Can't Hide Love", "After the Love Has Gone", "Don't You Worry 'Bout a Thing" and "Higher Ground", as well as two Braden originals.

With just one horn and a three-piece rhythm section, the complex arrangements of the originals are missed, but the melodies are powerful enough to carry the day and everyone is playing with love and respect for the material, swinging hard and spinning these classic songs into jazz gold. This goes beyond mere homage into real transformation.

For more information, visit donbraden.com. This project is at *Dizzy's Club May 23rd*. See Calendar.



Don't Look Down
Ken Fowser (Posi-Tone)
 by Ken Dryden

Although major labels have drastically cut their investments in new jazz artists, there are smaller independent operations with a knack for discovering up-and-coming musicians and giving them time to blossom over a series of recordings with their working bands. Tenor saxophonist Ken Fowser has been one of the premier artists for Posi-Tone, first co-leading a group with vibraphonist Behn Gillece, then fronting his own band.

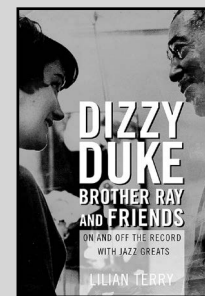
This quintet, which has frequently played both Smalls and Smoke, makes it sound like this music has been part of their live repertoire, with a spark present often missing from studio dates. Joining Fowser is Josh Bruneau (a rising star on trumpet), plus veterans pianist Rick Germanson, bassist Paul Gill and drummer Joe Strasser. All 11 tracks are Fowser originals and he proves to be an astute arranger, keeping one's interest by encouraging concise, creative solos. His excellent pacing of the music and wide variety of styles keep the listener engaged. One can only imagine the reaction hearing these songs in a club setting.

"Maker's Marc" could be a salute to Posi-Tone co-owner Marc Free. In any case, this frenetic opener finds the group in top form as they blend elements of postbop with Latin interludes and terrific interaction between the musicians. "You're Better Than That" is a lively samba with a contemporary flavor from

Germanson's switch to electric piano. "Fall Back" recalls the fever of hardbop stylists with its snappy theme and powerful rhythm, as Germanson, Bruneau and Fowser battle it out to a hard-fought draw for solo honors. The brisk "Top To Bottom" has the flavor of an Ornette Coleman blues with its twisted theme and showcases Fowser's most adventurous playing of the session though Gill's playful arco threatens to steal the spotlight. The freshness of the music and spirited playing throughout this CD make Fowser and his band essential to hear in person at the next opportunity.

For more information, visit posi-tone.com. Fowser is at *The Django at Roxy Hotel Fridays*. See Calendar.

IN PRINT



Dizzy, Duke, Brother Ray and Friends
(On and Off The Record with Jazz Greats)
Lilian Terry (University of Illinois Press)
 by Kevin Canfield

A radio host, concert organizer and accomplished vocalist, Lilian Terry played an important role on the Italian jazz scene for many years. Now in her 80s, she has written a jaunty memoir about the time she spent with some of the 20th century's legendary musicians.

Dizzy, Duke, Brother Ray and Friends is a book of laudable, if modest, ambitions. Terry isn't out to dish dirt and doesn't spend much time writing about the music itself. But taken for what it is—a collection of mostly flattering character sketches—this is a likeable effort.

Raised in Cairo and Florence, Terry began working for the Italian broadcaster RAI in the '60s. In the years that followed, she interviewed and befriended a host of visiting American jazz stars. Her fond memories of these artists fuel the book's most vivid chapters. In Terry's telling, Duke Ellington was a font of wry quotes—"I tour the world with a small case full of vitamins," he told her—and Max Roach was a resourceful host when she visited the U.S. In the late '60s, Terry was traveling with Roach and his fellow African-American bandmates when they were turned away by a racist Rhode Island innkeeper. The quick-thinking drummer responded by arranging alternative accommodations for the group: "It was only the next afternoon...that Max told me, greatly amused, that we had been the guests of Lucky Luciano's brother-in-law."

After Terry, the book's central character is probably Dizzy Gillespie. Friends for more than a quarter-century, Terry and the trumpeter collaborated on music education programs and an album released by an Italian label (*Oo-Shoo-Be-Doo-Be ...Oo, Oo ...Oo, Oo*, Soul Note, 1985). Gillespie, she says, was a brilliant, complex person. He could be moody, Terry says, and as he approached his 60th birthday, Gillespie rebelled against the idea of wearing a hearing aid. Though "not a 'Santa Claus' kind of man," Terry writes, Gillespie's "love of life and devotion to his music had raised him well above his shortcomings."

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