

Space Dimension
Noah Howard (America-Eating Standing)
 by Pierre Crépon

After the landmark American ex-pat BYG sessions of 1969 came another series of French avant garde recordings, undertaken by producer Pierre Jaubert for Musidisc subsidiary America. The LPs lack precise recording information but circumstantial evidence suggests that *Space Dimension* was taped around March 1970. It is one of four albums documenting one of the era's seminal bands, the Noah Howard-Frank Wright Quartet, which comprised the former on alto saxophone, latter on tenor, pianist Bobby Few and drummer Muhammad Ali, here replaced on short notice by Art Taylor. After various collaborations in New York, the group coalesced in France following the October 1969 Amougies Festival and remained a working unit until 1971. The group oscillated between two poles – broadly, melody and density – and its discography is split evenly, the other Howard date being *Uhuru Na Umoja* (inaccurately credited to Frank Wright).

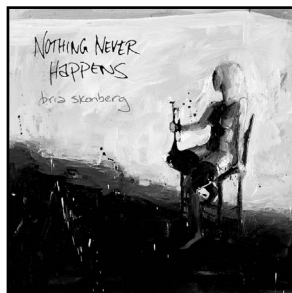
The title track is a slow-burning number featuring interwoven saxophone lines exploring the wide cosmic-like space created by the accompaniment. The group's sound tightens on "Viva Black", a dance-like theme with a nostalgic feel previously recorded by

Howard as "Ole Negro". Density moves up another notch on the disc's second side, where the music enters more typical avant garde, simultaneous soloing territory. Wright often adopts a supporting role to great effect on the regular recalls of the themes as riffs.

The only non-Howard original, Wright's "Church Number Nine", comes from a different session. What is heard is actually the last ten minutes of an hour-long rendition released on an eponymous Calumet LP. For arcane reasons, this closing section was omitted from French releases, used here, but the Japanese Odeon release features the full take. It is therefore the best way to hear this music, perhaps out of place in the present context.

Italian label Eating Standing makes the subtle distinction between represses and reissues. This repress could pass for a bootleg, but it is licensed to Howard's estate and akin to the original sonically. The pressing error present on the original (a few seconds of extra music between two tunes) could have been removed as it serves no purpose and historical notes are always a welcome addition 50 years on, but *Space Dimension* stands as the best document of one of the free jazz bands that mattered in a pivotal period and its return to circulation has been long overdue.

For more information, visit eatingstanding.bandcamp.com



Nothing Never Happens
Bria Skonberg (s/r)
 by Marilyn Lester

Bria Skonberg's latest CD, the enigmatically titled *Nothing Never Happens*, is the happy result of a self-imposed retreat – the trumpeter-singer-songwriter's escape from an "overload of information and feelings", as she describes it. The album release, celebrated with a three-night engagement last month at Jazz Standard, brought together players Ben Paterson (piano and organ), Doug Wamble (guitar), Devin Starks (bass), Darrian Douglas (drums) and Patrick Bartley (alto saxophone). The lineup differed only slightly from the CD, which has Mathis Picard on piano and Jon Cowherd on Hammond B3.

The intensely creative whole is a marriage of jazz and other genres, particularly rock. The CD is also as much about Skonberg as a vocalist – an accomplished one at that – as it is about her mastery of the trumpet. She could throw away that instrument tomorrow and count on her flexible, smooth and smoky vocal tone to carry her through. The musicality is sure in both cases, with phrasing and storytelling ability shining through in both modes. Most of the tunes are Skonberg's, with only three tracks of eight composed by others. The progression forms a dramatic arc, yet with each number standing vividly in its own right, lyrics and melody building to a clearly defined climax, denouement and conclusion. Sonny Bono's "Bang Bang", for instance, is fiercely delivered as jazz-rock, the vocal intensity mirrored in Skonberg's clear tone and clarion style of playing, reminiscent of the great Herb Alpert.

Seeing the project live not only allowed for extended spotlight solos over the constraints of recording limitations, but also showcased the leader herself as a personable presence. Her fierce commitment to her work was evident in her performance while her spoken manner was soft and gentle. In concert, the resident brilliance of "Black Bird Fantasy", a wildly creative mix of Duke Ellington-Bubber Miley's "Black

and Tan Fantasy" with John Lennon-Paul McCartney's "Blackbird", was especially elevated. Extended in performance, the haunting instrumental elements were intertwined with deliberate vocal choices, plus a wailing trumpet solo. The only purely instrumental track on the CD, the slyly named "Villain Vanguard", inspired by the 2016 Women's Marches, echoed that protest in a marching rhythm, freestyle improvisation and bright voicing of trumpet. "Blackout" especially showed off Skonberg's vocal range and phrasing ability, with deft fingering in the trumpet sections of the number, including an exquisite feathering effect.

A Skonberg staple, her own "So Is The Day", a haunting, almost dirge-like piece, was also performed at Jazz Standard, featuring virtuosic solos by her complement of sidemen. The set also included a rock-infused "Blackout" and ballad with a '50s feel, "What Now"; the CD version of this piece is notable for Cowherd's masterful command of Hammond organ. "I Want to Break Free", written by John Deacon of Queen fame, is presented as a percussive, freewheeling anthem with a wide-open yet cohesive sound. Completing the album is "Square One", written with Nashville-based Cariad Harmon, a tuneful country-inspired ballad, the only track not presented in concert.

Nothing Never Happens is an exhilarating experience. While each song has a very personal resonance, it's not necessary for the listener to know or understand that. The eight may describe an arc of meaning, but each song stands on its own as a beautifully polished gem. The variety of genres, range of emotions and superb musicianship win the day. Skonberg's growth as a musician, vocalist and songwriter portends more great things to come.

For more information, visit briaskonberg.com

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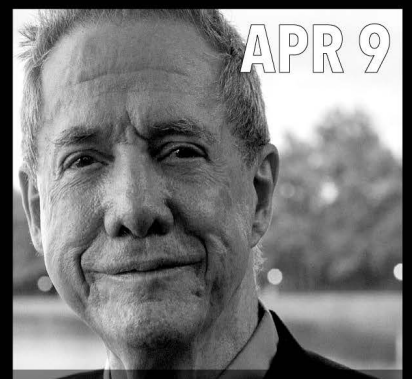
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