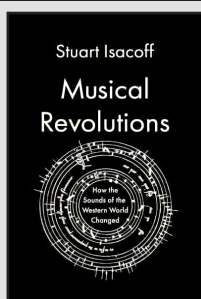


IN PRINT



Musical Revolutions:
How the Sounds of the Western World Changed
Stuart Isacoff (Knopf)
by Kevin Canfield

When a tradition-bound observer is baffled by a new development in jazz, an incoherent denunciation is sure to follow. American composer John Philip Sousa was a ragtime “naysayer”, Stuart Isacoff tells us in this smart but uneven book, calling it music that “makes you want to bite your grandmother.” As with many such insults, this one tells us more about the speaker than his target. One can only imagine how many elderly family members Sousa might have bitten had he heard bebop or free jazz.

In *Musical Revolutions*, Isacoff, founder of *Piano Today* magazine, focuses on artists whose innovations caused purists to bare their teeth. Though his narrative reaches back more than 1,000 years—there is a fascinating chapter on an 11th Century Italian monk who “devised a practical way of connecting notation to the physical act of singing”—he devotes much of his book to two strands of jazz history. One of these is set against a backdrop of early 20th Century Europe. The other, for the most part, played out in Manhattan clubs and recording studios after the Second World War. In the first of these—by far the more compelling of the pair—Isacoff recounts the story of James Reese Europe, a Black Harlem conductor whose success in France in the 1910s helped jazz go global. A lieutenant in the unit known as the Harlem Hellfighters, Europe led the 369th Infantry Regiment’s band, “the best band in the United States Army,” Isacoff writes, which played “in hospitals and public squares” during World War I. Their busy, irreverent sound recalled “that of a New Orleans marching band”, captivating French audiences. Europe was 38 when he was killed by a fellow musician in the U.S., but his time abroad inspired other Black Americans to follow his lead, opening jazz clubs and making albums in France. The popularity of the first wave of American jazz performers also roused successive generations of European musicians.

Isacoff’s second jazz storyline—it focuses on Charlie Parker’s bebop innovations and Miles Davis’ restless artistic journey—is unenlightening. You could fill a city-block-sized library with all that has been written about these two over the last eight decades and Isacoff, alas, has little of note to say about Parker’s “reformulations of standard songs into bebop showpieces” or the “rock-suffused rhythms” of Davis’ fusion period. These are fascinating landmark-moments in jazz history, of course, but Isacoff only rehashes what is already known. Knowledgeable readers can probably take a pass on this book, but they could mention it to neophyte fans. The singular artists and recordings discussed therein can help adventurous listeners escape the insidious artificial-intelligence-based recommendations determining so much of what gets listened to today. Breaking free from the grip of streaming-service algorithms would be another musical revolution worth writing about.

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Return To Shore (The Duo Sessions)
Kate Baker/Vic Juris (Strikezone)
by Jim Motavalli

Just after recording a lovely duet with vocalist wife Kate Baker on The Beach Boys’ classic “God Only Knows” (from *Pet Sounds*), guitarist Vic Juris felt extremely fatigued. A subsequent visit to the doctor confirmed the worst: neuroendocrine cancer, with a bad prognosis. The world lost the prolific Juris in December 2019. Three years later, we have these intimate recordings. The duo performed live together frequently, but hadn’t made a recording. The album also serves as Baker’s solo vocal debut (she concentrates on teaching), both introducing her to a wider world and paying tribute to a remarkable guitarist.

Juris made 26 solo albums, the most recent being *Let’s Cool One* eight months before his death. He had a 20-year association with saxophonist Dave Liebman and worked frequently with his close friend and fellow guitarist Dave Stryker (who produced here). On this album, we hear his sensitive side, on both electric and acoustic guitar, perfectly complementing his wife’s clear, unaffected singing.

On a slow, full-of-longing “God Only Knows”, Juris solos on acoustic before picking up his electric and improvising over his unamplified bed. Baker convinces us that God isn’t the only one who knows what she would be without him. Baker heard the title track in a Juris duo performance with Larry Coryell. She added the lyrics and wordless passages, recalling bliss on the beach “when we were young and free”. The tune has a Brazilian feel and Juris’ solo is reminiscent of the exquisite work guitarist Joe Diorio did with saxophonist Ira Sullivan on *The Breeze and I*. Also from down Brazil way is Ivan Lins’ “Magdalena”, best known in its Elis Regina version; Baker sings it expertly in the original Portuguese and Juris’ electric solo is one of quiet intensity.

Frederick Loewe-Alan Jay Lerner’s “I’ve Grown Accustomed to His Face” (from *My Fair Lady*) was a staple of Juris-Baker live shows and she is clearly singing it to and about him. There are two Joni Mitchell selections, “Black Crow” and “Both Sides Now”; the latter is much recorded, but the former (from Mitchell’s masterpiece *Hejira*) could use wider recognition. It gets an uptempo rendition, with furious flamenco-style strumming. In a wordless passage, Baker’s voice closely mirrors Juris’ guitar, a tribute to their telepathy.

Judy Collins’ version of Jimmy Webb’s “The Moon is a Harsh Mistress” is a model of clarity, but the Juris/Baker take adds empathy and feeling, Juris in supportive folk mode. “Moonscape”, another look at the wondrous orb, is a Juris ballad with Baker’s touching words and skillful vocalese. The harsh mistress can also inspire, “here at the edge, where moments measure time”. Alec Wilder’s “Blackberry Winter” is an elegiac breakup song, with pain and loneliness tied to the seasons. The focus is on Baker and she brings the poignancy fully home but Juris’ solo is gorgeous, too. Finally, there’s Baker’s “Are You Kind”, co-written by her friend Shari Miller and about her father’s passing at 55. In light of Juris’ too-early death at 66, it has new and affecting meaning. He also “took the time to be kind”.

This lovely album can be comfortably shelved next to Bill Evans’ duets with Tony Bennett, or Bill Frisell’s with Petra Haden.

For more information, visit davestryker.com



Station '70: Call in Question / Live Independence
Masayuki Takayanagi (P.S.F.-Black Editions)
by Pierre Crépon

In 1994-95, under arresting covers featuring urban landscapes and contrasted skies, the PSF label issued the the “J-Iコレクション” (“JI Collection”), an eight-CD series of unreleased live recordings. It challenged conceptions of what free jazz had sounded like during its Japanese beginnings c. 1969-72. The featured tapes, of saxophonists Kaoru Abe and Mototeru Takagi, guitarist Masayuki Takayanagi and bassist Motoharu Yoshizawa were of a different essence than the era’s studio albums. The music that had been played in small Tokyo coffeehouses and bars was rawer, uneasy, discomfiting.

Plainly, it was also more violent, regularly reaching direful intensity. More violent than what had come out of Tokyo studios, but also of free jazz’ homeland. There was something strongly non-American that demanded attention. Two titles, *Call in Question* and *Live Independence*, featured Masayuki Takayanagi’s New Direction group. Those March 1970 recordings are reissued here as a three-LP set. 20minutes of (noteworthy) previously unreleased music, taped a month earlier, fill a side of the third vinyl, and the original Japanese liner notes have now been translated.

The lineup is the original trio with whom Takayanagi (who would have turned 90 this month) started New Direction in the summer of 1969: bassist Yoshizawa and drummer Sabu Toyozumi. Saxophonist Takagi, another preeminent Japanese musician, at times joins. Several cuts use Takayanagi’s “mass projection” framework: a sudden, total unleashing of energy and guitar feedback, putting all meters firmly in the red, relentlessly.

Little documentation of Takayanagi’s thinking has been available in English until the recent publication of extended interviews in the fifth issue of the *Blank Forms* journal. “The Mass Projection schema, where it comes smashing through in a single blow, I based that on the image of a vein rupturing and blood suddenly spurting out,” Takayanagi says there. The image is apt.

Other pieces are built on a less harsh framework, tending instead toward a kind of stasis. “Excavation” stands out, with its slow thrust reminiscent of the hypnotic motion of construction work. Whatever the approach, this is difficult music, at times literally painful when employing extreme shrills. But it cannot be dismissed as mere experimental curiosity. The musicians are clearly reaching the goals they have set for themselves, highly futuristic for 1970. They include ripping the notion of group apart and yet ending complete improvisations in a highly together manner.

Even if often not understood, American free jazz had at its core a profound sense of the beautiful, of the intensely beautiful. It seems that Takayanagi’s radical departure lay there: this was not what he was seeking. “My sole intention was to drive a wedge of malevolence into the earth itself I couldn’t have cared less if anyone understood objectively what we were doing because the earth would understand,” he said of a 1971 performance. Such intent places one at the edge of the void. Listeners willing to follow suit are bound to get an often vertiginous glimpse of what lies there.

For more information, visit blackeditionsgroup.com