

LOCAL JAZZ GREATS

BY ANDREW GILBERT

The CD as an object might be headed for history's dustbin, but for jazz musicians in particular, CDs continue to play an essential role in building a career. Gaining entree to the relatively lucrative festival circuit often requires a recently released album, which partly explains why musicians are willing to go into serious debt to produce their own CDs. And albums serve more than a commercial function. The effort and expense required to create a CD forces artists to hone a near evening-length body of material, thinking through every aspect of production, including the elusive art of sequencing tracks. Despite the format's many limitations, like requiring an electron microscope to read liner note text, CDs will be missed as they turn into objects for aficionados, particularly by journalists looking to sum up the year's recorded highlights.

That said, here are my favorite 2005 CDs by Bay Area jazz artists:

SCOTT AMENDOLA BAND "Believe" (Cryptogramophone) Expanding his already vivid trap set palette with loops, live electronics and electric mbira (thumb piano), Amendola turns his loose-limbed compositions into a series of rugged soundscapes. With the sure-footed bass work of John Shifflett, the searing violin of Jenny Scheinman, and guitarists Jeff Parker and Nels Cline pushing and pulling each other into balletic squalls, Amendola's crackling music leaves little room for doubters.

PETER APFELBAUM & THE NEW YORK HIEROGLYPHICS "It Is Written" (Act) The Berkeley-raised Apfelbaum lives in Brooklyn now, but the extended cast on his first album in almost a decade features many of the players involved in his great 1980s Bay Area Hieroglyphics big band. Contributing on percussion, keyboards and reeds, Apfelbaum has created an intricate, personal style suffused with West African and Caribbean influences, and alive to jazz's improvisational imperative.

ANTHONY BROWN'S ORCHESTRA "Rhapsodies" (Water Baby Records) Following his acclaimed albums exploring the music of Ellington and Monk, Brown completes his great-American-composers trilogy with "American



Scott Amendola: His hand has a winning release in "Believe."

tation of Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue." Just as impressive are Brown's original pieces, particularly his Jazz in Flight-commissioned homage to trumpet iconoclast Lester Bowie, "Bread and Bowie," which features a torrid tenor solo by David Murray.

ANDRÉ BUSH "Start From Silence" (Odd Culture Productions) Delicate and dense, lyrical and abstract, Bush's music possesses a rare clarity. A guitarist of tremendous resources, he's found ideal collaborators in pianist Art Lande, bassist Peter Barshay, drummer Alan Hall, bass clarinetist Bruce Williamson and veteran producer Cookie Marenco.

CLARINET THING "Agony Pipes and Misery Sticks" (BC Records) Beth Custer finally documented her clarinet quintet with an album, recorded over a decade at venues around the Bay Area, featuring 16 lush and woody tracks, most lasting between two and four minutes. The startlingly beautiful music is pithy and expansive, like a great collection of short stories.

STEVE HECKMAN QUARTET "Live at Yoshi's" (World City Music) Tenor and soprano saxophonist Heckman makes his debt to Coltrane explicit with the first half of the program, stretching out on "Soul Eyes," "Equinox" and "You're a Weaver of Dreams" on this deeply satisfying session featuring an inspired rhythm section with pianist Matt Clark, bassist Karen Horner and drummer Jemal Ramirez.

BABATUNDE LEA "Suite Unseen: Summoner of the Ghost" (Motema) Lea is a drummer who knows how to transform a band into a communal action. Powered by the great saxophonist Richard Howell and trombone master Steve Turré,

as likely to offer a warm caress as a soulful punch to the solar plexus.

JOHN SCHOTT "John Schott's Typical Orchestra" (Smash the State) Chicago blues, reggae and Irish hornpipes are some of the traditions absorbed by Schott, the polymathic guitarist with an absurdist sense of humor. Joined by a superlative cast of Bay Area improvisers, Schott offers a wonderfully head-spinning journey through his feverish imagination.

WESLA WHITFIELD "In My Life" (HighNote) Whitfield just keeps getting better. On a program of mostly familiar standards, the jazz-informed singer turns each oft-told tale into an emotional X-ray, laying bare the soul of the song. Pianist Mike Greensill and bassist John Wiitala provide a musical safety net for her thrilling high-wire act.

JESSICA WILLIAMS "Live at Yoshi's Vol. 2" (MaxJazz) Williams, who is based in Santa Cruz, is one of jazz's most emotionally uninhibited improvisers. The sense of balance achieved here by her trio with bassist Ray Drummond and drummer Victor Lewis is what this music is all about, soul-deep communion by artists unafraid of beauty.

DENNY ZEITLIN "Solo Voyage" (MaxJazz) A solo piano session that unfolds like a series of disquieting dreams, this gorgeous album features some of Zeitlin's first forays into electronic music since his chilling score for Philip Kaufman's "Invasion of the Body Snatchers." The St. Louis label MaxJazz deserves kudos for continuing to document Zeitlin and Williams, great Bay Area artists at the peak of their powers. ■

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