



Manuel Valera

collaborators Hans Glawischnig on bass and E.J. Strickland on drums.

Valera drew inspiration from both the astronomical characteristics of each planet and also their mythological associations. The titles of the movements allude to their character — “Mars, Ancient Warrior,” “Neptune, Prophet of the Seas,” “Venus, Peace” — and one can hear turmoil on “Earth, The



History of Us,” or the meditative spirit of “Saturn, The Wise One.”

That said, because Valera limited himself to only a few scales and a rather austere, tightly controlled harmonic language, what he gains in consistency he risks in a certain overall sameness. Also, the severity of Slonimsky’s approach makes the music much more appealing intellectually than emotionally. Notably, the playing throughout is both remarkably resourceful and disciplined. Think of contemporary actors improvising in Shakespearian style, never straying from the language and syntax of the period. So, after 50-plus minutes, when bonus-track readings of Marta Valdés’ “Llora” and Elton John’s “Mona Lisas and Mad Hatters” come up, the contrast is startling. It suggests a movie suddenly going from black and white to color, and serves as a reminder of Valera’s talent to create universes where different rules of gravity apply.

— Fernando Gonzalez



Jay Phelps
Free As the Birds
(Ropeadope)

Vancouver-born, London-based trumpeter and composer Jay Phelps has internalized a global scope of musical influences during the past two decades. And he puts most of them in play on *Free As the Birds*, an album that defines stylistic eclecticism. From Cuban and Brazilian modes to hip-hop, soul, bebop and free jazz, Phelps is guided by the spirit of genre-jumping pioneers such as Miles Davis, Donald Byrd, Herbie Hancock and Weldon Irvine. Spacey synth work on some tracks recalls Lonnie Liston Smith, while funky, repetitious backbeats elsewhere boast the groovy vibe of early Kool & the Gang. The 15-track session, regardless of stylistic reference, abounds with imaginative arrangements and impassioned musicianship.

“Chaos or Commerce” is among the date’s most provocative performances, featuring a powerhouse ensemble comprising pianist John Escreet, alto saxophonist David Binney and drummer Nasheet Waits. The leader’s trumpet weaves harmonically tense phrases over Escreet’s barebones, subtly dissonant comping. In the background, snippets of commentary, including lines from a Martin Luther King Jr. speech, rail against economic and racial inequity and other societal woes. In contrast, “Chomtalay Chill,” with its bubbly electronic effects, sighing female vocals, muted trumpet and a foundation of warm Fender Rhodes

Photo by Lisa St. Cyr

chording, could be the soundtrack for a late-night cocktail-lounge rendezvous.

Phelps showcases a low-key vocal style on the title tune. The arrangement captures a tropical mood with an introductory chorus of birds happily chirping and a seductive introduction in Portuguese by Luana Soares Harf. Halfway through the track, the tempo ratchets up to a furious pulse; radiates an acid-jazz, Euro-bossa personality; and spotlights a piquant outing by soprano saxophonist Stacy Dillard and more velvety trumpet work by the leader. While Phelps’ command of disparate idioms is impressive, it’s the magnetic appeal of his warm-toned, soft-sell trumpet style that creates the lasting impression.

— Mark Holston

Martin Wind
Light Blue
(Laika)

Bassist Martin Wind’s pleasant and varied *Light Blue* — his 20th album as leader or co-leader — features some of the finest instrumentalists of our time, including clarinetist Anat Cohen and trumpeter Ingrid Jensen. Gary Versace and Matt Wilson play keyboards and drums, respectively, on the first five tunes; Bill Cunliffe and Duduka Da Fonseca take over for the next five. Multi-reed player Scott Robinson arrived at the gig fully armed, with horns ranging from bass saxophone to *taragota* (a Hungarian horn that sounds like a fatter-toned clarinet), and he manages to make each instrument fit ideally into every setting.

Comprising 10 originals, the album opens with “While I’m Still Here,” a composition that owes its life to Horace Silver’s “Sister Sadie” without ever quite equaling the original’s infectious funk. “Rose,” written in memory of Wind’s mother-in-law, pairs Versace on organ with Robinson on *taragota*, but the beauty is in the ear of the beholder — one listener’s spiritual dreamscape is another’s forgettable movie soundtrack. “Ten Minute Song” (named for the time required to compose the tune, not for its

Photo by Olff Appold



Martin Wind

length) includes charming, whimsical contributions from Cohen on clarinet and Robinson on bass clarinet. “February” features one of Jensen’s best solos, and “Power Chords,” which begins ominously, as though beckoning humpback whales, transitions into a rock beat with organ dominating the background.

Distinguished Brazilian vocalist Maucha Adnet performs on the four final

songs, including “De Norte a Sul,” Wind’s best-known tune. On “A Sad Story,” an early composition that shares a vibe with the theme to *Cinema Paradiso*, Wind bows the melody with a tone as rich as a magnificent cabernet sauvignon. It’s one of the few moments where we hear the talented leader at his very best.

— Sascha Feinstein

**Megumi Yonezawa/
Masa Kamaguchi/Ken Kobayashi**
Boundary
(ESP-Disk)

Individually, pianist Megumi Yonezawa, bassist Masa Kamaguchi and drummer Ken Kobayashi are accomplished improvisers. Together they make stimulating and memorable music. Their debut, the captivating *Boundary*, superbly documents the collaboration of these Japanese expats — Yonezawa and Kobayashi live in New York and Kamaguchi resides in Madrid — while focusing primarily on their collective



MARTIN WIND Light Blue