



John Abercrombie|The Third Quartet|ECM 1993

For seven years John Abercrombie has plowed this quartet's field of possibilities, and the sonic similarity between his guitar and Mark Feldman's unamplified violin actually increases the air in the music. While they soar to their instruments' upper reaches and circle each other like two blue kites, bassist Marc Johnson seems gravitationally drawn to the bass's lower register, and all the space in between seems to further the illusion of an updraft. Drummer Joey Baron is too astute to clutter this. He keeps his sounds as concise as his ideas, and mostly espouses them softly. Given such clearly defined roles, and despite the unfettered improvising, the end effect is not unlike a string quartet, dancing as one across Abercrombie's wistful melodies, plus one each by Ornette Coleman and Bill Evans. Superb.

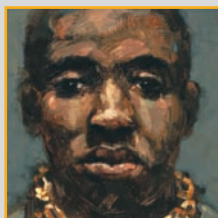
Oynsemble Melbourne|Ascension|Birdland BL 012

If you've ever stood in a tropical storm and relished the deluge rather than trying to escape it, you already know something of the pleasure contained in the torrential power of *Ascension*. The stimulus was the two 1965 molten pieces of music recorded under this name by John Coltrane. Melbourne drummer Ted Vining has taken Coltrane's simple theme and collective fervor and not just run with it, but bolted. The original's 11 players have become a gargantuan 19, perhaps over-complicating the recording, because the mix is too subdued. This is at odds with the actual music, which is sometimes an exhilarating experience, as surging solos and duets are punctuated with collective squalls. Among those to have ascended the storm clouds to this particular heaven are saxophonists Andy Sugg and Adam Simmons, and trombonist Adrian Sheriff.



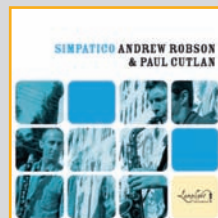
Adrian Cunningham Quartet|In Motion|Newmarket NEW3229.2

Many musicians, like actors, have a wretched time being pigeonholed, but Adrian Cunningham has a whole wardrobe of multiple musical hats. A rarity, he is equally convincing across the whole jazz spectrum, and his own band—with pianist Bill Risby, bassist Dave Pudney, and drummer Gordon Rytmeister—only marginally narrows the scope. Take the first three tracks of this live CD. *Keeping Fit with Ken* has Cunningham playing tenor saxophone on a high-energy 24-bar blues in the 60s Blue Note mold. The second, *Ubirr*, places his clarinet in a context of such lyricism it could spring from the ECM catalog. The third, *Gratitude*, represents the West Coast big ballad school—and is therefore my least favorite piece on a very entertaining album that is accompanied by a bonus live DVD.



Wynton Marsalis|From The Station To The Penitentiary|Blue Note 094637367520

Most artists either over- or under-estimate their own abilities. It's the ones capable of accurate self-criticism who usually produce the best work. In creating a song-cycle critique of modern America and the plight of its black population, Wynton Marsalis's motives were sound, but he is not the lyricist and barely the composer to realize his vision. The big plus is that his writing—sometimes reminiscent of Charles Mingus—leaves much improvisational space, and the playing is as exceptional as the recording quality. Marsalis himself blows some unusually raw trumpet, and saxophonist Walter Blanding sends emotional tornadoes through several pieces, scooping up the other players, including buoyant pianist Dan Nimmer. Young singer Jennifer Sanon, however, is a little green to be saddled with the challenge of making the words convincing.



Andrew Robson & Paul Cutlan|Simpatico|Lamplight LLR00106

Just the thought of horns without accompaniment is enough to drive some people to distraction, or at least out of the room. They should risk lingering a little. Andrew Robson and Paul Cutlan have been playing together for a dozen years, and their *simpatico*, always conspicuous, now flourishes on 11 improvised duets for Robson's alto saxophone and Cutlan's Eb and bass clarinets and tenor saxophone. There's nothing esoteric or "difficult" about this beautiful music. Texturally it is as abundant as a rain forest, with Cutlan's bass clarinet being a garden of surprises all by itself, and the fused musicality of the two players ensures the improvisations are never groping for ideas. Each piece is distinctive in mood, from the braying eastern carnival of *The Mighty Khan* to the boppish swoops of *Running Into Time*.

Tord Gustavsen Trio|Being There|ECM 2017

Tord Gustavsen's third album luxuriates in more of the spacious, softly contoured, unashamedly romantic jazz, the pianist's compositions performed with bassist Harald Johnsen and drummer Jarle Vespestad. *Being There* is not just a carbon copy of its predecessors, however. Where they were kept on a tight dynamic leash, this one brings a nudge more of the drama implicit in the trio's concerts to the surface, moving the music further away from an "ambient" tag. As before, the pieces are kept short and the melodies are often exquisitely sensual, while the harmonic modulations can sometimes add the vaguest trace of soft-porn corniness. Gustavsen has beautiful touch and a facility far beyond the needs of his own compositions. Vespestad again exhibits almost freakish control, his drums and cymbals wearing a halo of reverberation.

