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LOUIS ARMSTRONG'S INTEGRATION • SUN RA ARKESTRA BLASTS OFF AGAIN

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Editor's Pick

ALEXA TARANTINO

Clarity
Posi-Tone



I first noticed Alexa Tarantino at the Umbria Jazz Festival in Perugia, Italy in 2012. Ryan Truesdell had brought 26 students from the Eastman School of Music to perform his *Gil Evans Project*. Tarantino was not one of the orchestra's featured soloists, but Truesdell told me she had quickly picked up several new reed instruments because the project needed them, including bassoon. She had just turned 20.

Fast forward eight years. Tarantino now has a bachelor's degree from Eastman and a master's from Juilliard, and lights up rooms when she solos. On her second album, *Clarity*, she plays alto and soprano saxophones, flute, and alto flute. The broad timbral palette is intriguing for a quartet record.

She opens on flute with a flawless rendering of "Through," her own gradually intensifying modal piece. She sings "Gregory Is Here" on soprano saxophone,



"Lights up rooms when she solos": Alexa Tarantino

spilling ecstatic variations on one of Horace Silver's most alluring themes. On alto saxophone, she portrays the wistful melody of Luis Demetrio's "La Puerta" in a single graceful gesture that feels effortless.

Superior technique enables her to sound unhurried at any tempo, and chops also allow her to relax into

her first priority: melody. The only well-known tune here is the last track, "My Ship." Who knew that Kurt Weill's iconic song was meant for alto flute? Tarantino lavishes that instrument's rich, sensuous sonorities upon Weill's haunting melody. (The solos of pianist Steven Feifke and bassist Joe Martin are also rapt.)

She is a straight-ahead mainstream player who will continue to grow, but there is no need to wait for her future. Based on the last track here, Alexa Tarantino's ship has sailed. **THOMAS CONRAD**

playing. *Spirit Groove*, which places him in a quartet with frequent collaborator David Murray on tenor sax, is a fine example of this style—but also of its limitations in the studio.

Both are clear from the 20-minute-plus opener "In My House." El'Zabar works into a foot-stamping groove on kalimba and bells, with the attendant grunts and raw soul singing. Yet he has to attenuate that groove for pianist Justin Dillard, then again for Murray's entrance with a gorgeous long-tone solo. El'Zabar's vocal utterances remain impassioned but quieter—either his microphone is turned down or he's moved away from it. It's less direct, less affecting, in a way that doesn't happen in the close environment of a jazz club. The same is true on "Katon" and "In the Spirit," beautiful compositions and performances whose meditative *miens* better suit the restraints but still feel diminished.

Some tracks were recorded live, as is clear even without the crowd noise. El'Zabar is unfettered, more robust in his ejaculations ("Open up the door! Open up the door!"), on Murray's "Necktar," even as he competes with both Murray and Dillard (on electric piano). On the mellow funk "One World Family," he's still low in the mix—about the same level as bassist Emma Dayhuff—but his stream of growls is the tune's backbone. It suggests that the drawback of the studio is not the medium itself, but the lack of audience energy on which El'Zabar can feed. In short, *Spirit Groove* is both a worthy document of El'Zabar's music and a reminder that recordings in jazz are always second-best. **MICHAEL J. WEST**

skittering-turned-soulful "Patrona" and rooted romp "Santa Rosita" make for a paired dedication to guitarist Julian Lage. A spiritually weighted "Rambler," coupled with an arco take on Ornette Coleman's "Lonely Woman," leans on the wisdom of bassist Charlie Haden. And Brazilian composer Noel Rosa's melodically driven "Silêncio de um Minuto" and Roeder's album-ending "Les Lapins" reference work and personal history with the band Avianrio and drummer Ziv Ravitz, respectively. *El Suelo Mío* is fertile land built with imagination and care. **DAN BILAWSKY**

KAHIL EL'ZABAR'S SPIRIT GROOVE

Kahil El'Zabar's Spirit Groove ft. David Murray Spiritmuse

Kahil El'Zabar's music hinges on the drummer/percussionist's paroxysms. He gets himself into a groaning, head-swiveling (and mesmerizing) trance, seeming almost to lose control—except he never misses a beat on drums, kalimba, or whatever he's



CORY SMYTHE

Accelerate Every Voice Pyroclastic

File under jazz? New music? Classical? Free improvisation? Try all of the above. The sonic language that Cory Smythe has brought to his own recordings as leader, and to his work as a collaborator and sideman, blurs any lines.

Smythe's multifaceted, cerebral



ANNA VASKEVICH