

# JAZZ

## Alexa Tarantino: Firefly (Posi-Tone)

by NEIL TESSER



The most striking thing about Alexa Tarantino is her alto saxophone sound — not because of any radical innovations or signature quirks, but rather for her ability to shade it just enough to fit a range of material without altering its essence. Diving into up-tempo cookers on her new release, *Firefly*, like her knuckle-busting “Surge Capacity,” she shadows hard-bop timbre with a sliver of softness; it lends a hint of humility to the swagger. When she pours herself into “Iris” — one of two lesser-played Wayne Shorter compositions — her hushed-tone poetry shows flashes of that hard-bop steel. She excels at nuance.



Tarantino's slippery technique is impressive enough, but these tone adjustments constitute her calling card — along with the creative passion she imparts in her improvisations. (You won't hear a rote note on *Firefly*.) Leading a quintet comprising fellow Posi-Tone leaders Behn Gillece (vibes) and Art Hirahara (piano), plus bassist Boris Kozlov and the masterly drummer Rudy Royston, she channels New York sheen on her fast stuff; aggressively pushes the mainstream envelope on the high-octane “Rootless Ruthlessness”; and leans into her excellent flute and

soprano-sax work on several lightly Latin, California-cool tracks.

Tarantino has two previous albums under her name, having built her reputation as a member of the DIVA big band and Arturo O'Farrill's Afro Latin Jazz Orchestra. She's also starred in three collectives organized by Posi-Tone, working with several of her label mates in quintet and sextet settings. Tarantino treats her own group as a sort of collective: *Firefly* includes a composition from each of her sidemen, and her own songs don't appear until 20 minutes in.

The label's mix-and-match of roster artists carries some risks. With many leaders sharing similar personnel, the lines can blur between albums, as happened on some of the less distinctive Blue Note albums of the '50s and '60s. Tarantino mostly avoids that trap with muscular compositions and a sure hand at the helm, as this easy-on-the-ears release confidently strides toward the breakout album that seems just around the corner. — **Neil Tesser**

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