

MICHAEL WALDER TRIO: BLUES FOR RAY

Review by Eric Myers

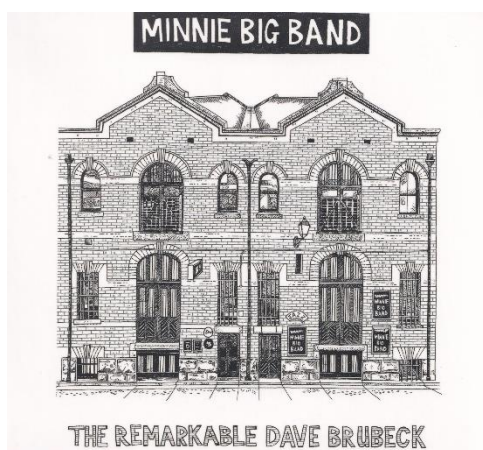
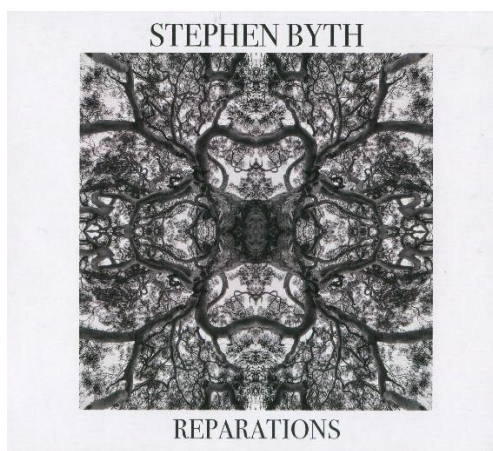
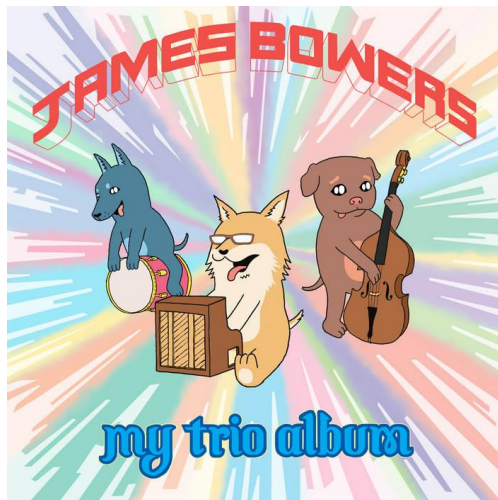
Label: Independent

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As a reviewer for a leading quality newspaper (*The Australian*) I've been in the fortunate position of being showered with new jazz releases for the last five years. One of the things that has astonished me over say the last 12 months is the extraordinary quality of debut albums by Australian jazz artists. This is unmissable, and I believe it illustrates an extraordinary flowering of new talent amongst young musicians and also an unprecedented depth of talent, over and above the music of the accepted leading musicians in the art form.

To give examples, I urge readers to seek out three debut albums: one from Melbourne pianist James Bowers entitled *My Trio Album*; the album *Reparations* from the Melbourne saxophonist/composer Stephen Byth; and the Minnie Big Band's album, *The Remarkable Dave Brubeck*, which features an 18-piece big band led by Melbourne composer/arranger 20-year-old Minnie Hill. Listen to these albums, and correct me if I'm wrong. Interestingly they all come out of the current Melbourne jazz scene, which appears to be producing a never-ending supply of interesting and original music.



Three outstanding debut albums: pianist James Bowers' "My Trio Album"; "Reparations" from saxophonist/composer Stephen Byth; & the Minnie Big Band's "The Remarkable Dave Brubeck"...

Blues For Ray from Sydney's Michael Walder Trio is another debut album to hit my desk, and it underlines my point. The trio includes Walder on double bass in tandem with two outstanding musicians, pianist Aaron Blakey and drummer Alex Hirlian, winner of the highly competitive 2018 National Jazz Awards at Wangaratta.

Walder himself is a splendid bassist with a very big sound, and I'm not sure whether this emanates from his attack on the instrument in live performance, or whether a studio engineer has built up his sound in the mix because he's the bandleader and, after all, it's his album. Put it this way: he's more Ray Brown than Gary Peacock, if you know what I mean, and that's not a bad thing.



Michael Walder: more Ray Brown than Gary Peacock, if you know what I mean...

Having said that, this first-class modern jazz rhythm section propels what is basically a fierce hard-bop group, especially when guest horn players Simon Ferenci (trumpet) and Chris O'Dea (tenor saxophone) are added on some tracks. Vocalist Nic Jeffries also is present on one track, Antonio Carlos Jobim's *Chega De Saudade (No More Blues)*. This a band that fires, utilising what is still the essential language of jazz.

Speaking of Ray Brown, the title track *Blues For Ray* is the only original on the album, written by Walder as a tribute to Brown, whom Walder describes in the liner notes as “the great man himself”. Other than that original, and the Jobim composition already mentioned, the remaining five tracks are well-known standards: *Days of Wine & Roses*, *Stella By Starlight*, *Darn That Dream*, *Cotton Tail* and *Like Someone in Love*.

It is sometimes said that such standards have been played and recorded so much that they are now tired workhorses. The truth is that they are merely vehicles for improvisation, and the artistry in the music stems from what the musicians can do as improvisers over what may be well-known chordal structures. These musicians pass with flying colours, producing an album that epitomises how well the essential language of jazz is played today in Australia.



Pianist Aaron Blakey: another New Zealander to watch...

If you wish to know what I like *most* about the album it is the playing of Blakey on piano. Another New Zealander, interestingly, to grace our shores, he's a player to watch.
