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Synergy Music : Label Profile

by Jay Collins
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When considering the hotbeds of mainstream jazz, the Denver-Boulder, Colorado area is hardly one that immediately springs to mind. Thus, it may come as a surprise to learn that not only are there several well-known musicians that reside in the area, like Hugh Ragin, Ron Miles, Fred Hess, Dianne Reeves, and local legend, Art Lande, but that there is also a vibrant and exciting regional scene at work.

One of the brightest spots is the existence of an independent label, Synergy Music. Formed in 1996 by Michael Fitts, a jazz lover and former sound engineer, this "labor of love" was designed with an aim to help talented musicians release their music. Since its formation, the label has released approximately 20 titles, seeking to "showcase original, creative, primarily acoustic jazz music", drawing artists from mostly the Denver-Boulder region. Looking at said catalog, the music has a bit of a bipolar focus, that of both mainstream jazz of the hard bop variety, as well as "ECM with an attitude".

The most visible of Synergy Music's artists is pianist/composer/drummer Art Lande, arguably the label's muse. For those unaware of Lande, in the words of the label's GM, Mitchell Feldman, "Art has been a mentor to generations of jazz artists in the Denver-Boulder area for the past 25 years." Furthermore, he is "probably the most world-class master musician in the Denver-Boulder area". An incredibly prolific performer with a seemingly endless stream of music, Lande spent the 70s gigging with bright lights like Steve Swallow, Ted Curson, and Jan Gabarek and his quartet Rubisa Patrol, which released its debut on ECM. After work in Europe, Lande relocated to Boulder and has been there ever since. Though also a drummer, Lande's piano skills demonstrate an incredible depth that allows for his staunch romanticism (a la Bill Evans) and fluid touch to meld well with his hearty improvisational aspirations.

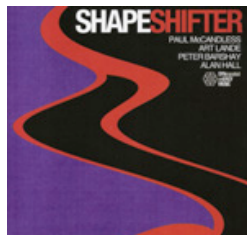
In addition to Lande's many appearances (causing some to wonder if Synergy Music was run by Lande himself), there are several nuggets in the back catalog; though frankly, about half of its past releases are either somewhat mundane or flat-out weak. The strongest releases include sessions from local tenor legend, Billy Tolles, who recently passed away, driving bop from Convergence, a cooperative featuring saxophonist John Gunther and trumpeter Greg Gisbert, a live date from the Paul Warburton Quartet with Ron Miles, another co-led session from trumpeter John McNeil and reedist Kenny Berger, the inspired organ trio, Tri-Ocity and two vocal sets from Mary Ann Moore. An important aspect of the label's future turns on the fact that Synergy Music is part of a privately held pool of companies under the Synergy Media Group. Accordingly, Synergy Music has the luxury of having a jazz retail and press promotion under the same roof (INDIEgo Jazz Promotions) as well as an independent distributor (Synergy Distribution, who also distributes Accurate, Enja Records, and Smalls, among others). As Feldman notes, "if it weren't for these sister companies, it would not be possible to have the label."

Synergy Music could have continued its practice of documenting local artists that fit within its stylistic vision, without much marketing push and a lack of a firm visual concept. However, the label decided to broaden its horizons by bringing in industry veteran/marketing guru/journalist/auteur Feldman in January of 2004. Feldman's presence was felt almost immediately, due not only to his decision-making with respect to the label's future output, but also with regard to the look of the label's releases. Feldman says, "One of the first things that I did was to work with the label's art department to come up with a new look. I gave them a book of Reid Miles covers [*Blue Note: The Album Cover Art*] to see what they could come up with." Feldman also refined the existing logo and developed a catch phrase: "I like to play with words and as a result, I came up with the SYNcopated enERGY MUSIC tagline." These two developments created a new stylistic concept for the label, something that it lacked previously. The result is a consistent and instantly recognizable look that makes its first appearance on the four releases considered here, as well as a promotional sampler that Feldman compiled, *SYNcopated enERGY*, which serves as an introduction to the label's highlights.

Of the four new releases, first up is *Green Light*, trombonist Alex Heitlinger's debut that collects a sextet of Denver-based musicians, including saxophonist Peter Sommer, Lande, bassist Dwight Kilian, drummer Jill Frederickson, and of particular note, trumpeter Greg Gisbert. As for Heitlinger, only 24 and a recent New York transplant, he demonstrates great promise through his knack for writing catchy melodies. Throughout the ten-song program, all composed by Heitlinger, the sextet navigates mostly bop terrain with corresponding levity that reflects the overall optimism inherent in Heitlinger's writing and of the proceedings as a whole. The real key, though, is the colorful horn arrangements that are broadcasted immediately on the opening "Green Light", a buoyant, yet driving piece that demonstrates the group's highly interactive level and the strident work of Lande's piano.



Other high spots include the jagged waltz of "Crazy Jake", which ratchets up the excitement level once Heitlinger takes center stage, a performance that reminds one of the joy of a carnival. The polyphony from the horns also inspires, as does Sommer's sonorous soprano work. The front line also becomes rather feisty during the persnickety "The Foot", perhaps the session's most "outside" venture. Heitlinger's sensitivity also shines through on the pensive "Dusk", which eventually locks into a modal groove, as well as the picturesque waltz "Missing You", which features marvelous work from Gisbert, demonstrating why he is such a hot commodity in New York. Considering the whole, then, this record is sure to please those looking for a mix of mainstream jazz and announces the arrival of a name to watch.



When one considers reedist Paul McCandless, the first thing that's likely to come to mind is his West-meets-East "world fusion" group, Oregon. Known for his oboe work in Oregon, McCandless interestingly focuses on other reeds here. While there are several lighter-edged compositions, the variety of this release is unexpected, especially due to the appearance of freely improvised pieces. The eleven-song program of melodic contemporary jazz—scripted entirely by Lande—focuses on the interface between McCandless and the pianist, ably assisted by bassist Peter Barshay and drummer Alan Hall.

The majority of the pieces feature McCandless' soprano work, with the lion's share utilized on the introspective pieces. Tracks like "Majestorum Enborum", "Pompanuk Pond", and the record's closer, "Musiverse", feature a tranquil, poetic approach that relies on soaring harmonies and drummer Alan Hall's gliding cymbal work. The tender ballad "Angels In The Sky" and the laid back, cinematic "Sultana" also help to create the record's reflective

mood. It's not all easy street, though, as the hard-swinging "Pietroglyph" has this group at its most energized, sparked by McCandless and Lande's interplay. McCandless also takes a turn on bass clarinet on "Shapeshifter", with Lande's vibrant chords walking in the blues arena.

Perhaps the biggest surprise is that after a career spanning three decades, this is McCandless' first formal tenor appearance. The 6/8 march of "Rigamarole", then, is a fitting intro, with McCandless' bold tone working with Barshay's sturdy maneuvers and Lande's rollicking double-time swing. The previous being said, perhaps the second biggest surprise is the appearance of three freely improvised tracks, including the rustling "Rattling The Cage", the energized swing of "Argument", and the dreamy "On A Misted Moor", highlighted by McCandless' English horn. Overall, a surprisingly diverse set from this quartet that provides further evidence of the vitality of the McCandless-Lande partnership.

Bassist Ken Walker is a busy man around town, though looking at the personnel, one has to wonder—"who the heck are these guys?" *Terra Firma* finds Walker in the company of a sextet that includes trumpeter Al Hood, tenor saxophonist Peter Sommer, guitarist Dave Corbus, pianist Jeff Jenkins, and drummer Paul Romaine. As liner note scribe/legend Benny Golson notes after reviewing each musician's CV, however, "these guys are not any 'poop butt' musicians". Keeping that maxim in mind, this eleven-song program of straight ahead jazz mixes band originals and several appealing covers. Right off the bat, the secret weapon here is pianist Jenkins, who contributes rich, McCoy Tyneresque chord structures and electrifying runs to spark pretty much every track.

The many highlights of this disc commence with George Coleman's "Amsterdam After Dark", a Latinesque bop that sets the pace immediately, with Jenkins' work being particularly exciting before he yields to Hood's bright lines and a tasty excursion from Romaine. Next up is Eddie Harris' bop anthem "Velocity", which cooks along nicely, as well as the aptly titled "Boogie Woogie Bossa Nova", which makes for an interesting rhythmic scheme and a great feature for Corbus' lyrical attack. Likewise, the offbeat arrangement of Cole Porter's "Just One Of Those Things" leaves the group with plenty of wiggle room.



Walker's own compositions prove memorable and look to the Golden Age of bop, with dashes of Blue Note here and there, as well as nods to the great records of the era. High points include the funky swing of "Ms. P & P", with the help of Sommer's forthright tenor statements, and the hard swing of "Terra Firma", where Sommer demonstrates that he is more than happy to ruffle a few feathers. The group also demonstrates its serenity during the Latin breeze of "Mi Nena" with a sensitive Sommer and Hood's sweet flugelhorn, as well as on the gorgeous ballad "Blackberry Winter". Walker also allows a brief moment in the spotlight for himself on the Oscar Pettiford sounding (as in "Tricotism") "Blues For P.K.", a tasty blues. Finally, Jenkins also shines again on his own "Highlife", a memorable composition that reminds of Horace Silver's sanguinity with everyone feeling good (and shaking their rumps). This is a top-notch bop record that's pretty much as good as it gets.



Perhaps the main reason that folks are going to be checking out Synergy Music has to do with the appearance of two masters on the label, namely saxophonist Archie Shepp and pianist Mal Waldron. This 2002 Parisian date, licensed from Enja Records, pairs the duo for a moving tribute to Billie Holiday. This ten-song program creates a late-night vibe that is an apt testament to Holiday's legacy, as well as to Waldron, who appears in one of his last, if not the last recording before his passing. Waldron, Holiday's accompanist during her last days (who, incidentally, has two other *Left Alone* discs, one with a trio, and the other, *Left Alone '86*, a duet with Jackie McLean), performs with a revelatory level of restraint and an arresting sincerity. His rich chordal structures coax Shepp repeatedly and also sparkle during his vibrant solo turns. As for Shepp, his raspy, Ben Websterish tone remains vital, as he conveys a beguiling amount of emotion with each breath, despite his arguably limited technical skillset. In fact, it is this fragile, awkward beauty (yes, this is the same "angry young tenor") that keeps one returning for additional courses.

One of Holiday's signature pieces, "Easy Living", starts the proceedings off with a soulful and romantic reading from Shepp and Waldron's smoldering tones. Similarly, "Porgy" and "Lady Sings The Blues" reflect the deep romanticism of the duo. Waldron's "Left Alone" is also deeply felt, with the pianist's shimmering chords highlighting his tenacious restraint. On the other hand, "Nice Work If You Can Get It" has the pair in a joyous place, as does the cautiously optimistic "When Your Lover Has Gone". Of course, who could miss the Shepp blues vocalizing on "Blues For 52nd Street", with Waldron laying down thick chords beneath the testimonials.

Shepp also brought along his soprano sax for the date and, in contrast to his tenor work that contains shades of his gruff past, his playing on the straight horn reflects a fitting vulnerability. For instance, his forlorn approach fits the tenderness of "Everything Happens To Me" beautifully, as does the reserved, yet happy-go-lucky feel of "I Only Have Eyes For You". As a whole, *Left Alone Revisited* is a beautiful duet that demonstrates a spiritual connection between these legends and the material.

In conclusion, these four releases demonstrate an exciting new step for Synergy Music. When discussing what the future holds for the label, Feldman noted that Synergy is "hungry and looking for new artists". Seeking to broaden their horizons and with an eye towards national recognition, Feldman states that the label will continue with its stated goals, seeking to promote emerging talent. Here's to a bright future and recognition beyond Colorado's borders.

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