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Recent Recordings by Area Jazz Artists

REVIEWED BY PIOTR MICHALOWSKI

It seems that it was only yesterday that **Michael Malis** graduated from the University of Michigan, but he seems to have been with us forever as one of the most sought-after pianists in southeastern Michigan. His versatility allows him to accompany singers, work with traditional and modern jazz elders, or to explore the most advanced improvisational new music concepts.

Having begun his jazz piano studies early in life with Bess Bonier and finished them off with Geri Allen at U-M, Malis understands the importance of knowing the tradition as a springboard for creating music for our time and not as a nostalgic space that stifles creativity. Many will know him from his weekly engagement as part of the Heather Black Experience at the Raven's Club in Ann Arbor or from his work with the late Marcus Belgrave. For some time he has led a trio at Cliff Bell's club in Detroit in a weekly engagement, often serving as tenorist Marcus Elliot's rhythm section, playing modern jazz standards as well as his own compositions.

With his regular band mates Ben Rolston (bass) and Stephen Boegehold (drums) he has just released ***The Michael Malis Trio – Lifted from the No of All Nothing*** ([Polyfold](#) 2015). This is complex, emotionally



charged music that immediately pulls in the listener but requires repeated hearing to be experienced in depth. Malis wrote all the compositions, but the realization is a group effort as Rolston and Boegehold contribute mightily to the shifting rhythms, colors and motifs that are characteristic of the leader's writing and playing. The album is well paced so that each piece is quite different in mood and tempo; indeed, one has the sense of listening to a suite rather than a mere succession of tunes. There is much beauty on this album, but without sentimentality, and no matter the tempo, there is a strong rhythmic propulsion that drives the music forward.

Malis has studied various piano masters, but he never sounds like someone else and his own musical personality, which in this instance is characterized by a seamless continuum between compositional and instrumental qualities, is shown to great advantage. He has been fortunate enough to work regularly with the same trio for some time and the experience shows.

Another pianist who had recently studied with Geri Allen at U-M, Ann Arbor pianist and composer **Glenn Tucker**, has just released his first album as a leader, ***Determination*** ([DMF2009](#)), in the company of some of Detroit's finest instrumentalists from various generations: Dwight Adams (trumpet), Vincent Chandler (trombone), Rafael Statin (tenor saxophone), Robert Hurst (bass), and Alex White (drums).

Although relatively young, Tucker has been establishing a reputation as a versatile pianist who is called upon to work in a broad range of stylistic contexts. On his own recording he sticks to modern mainstream jazz, rooted in upgraded versions of sixties and seventies stylings. He wrote and arranged all the tunes on *Determination*, creating stimulating vehicles for his soloists, and they reacted well to the challenges set by the composer, but this is very much a showcase for Tucker's piano playing. The full band sounds at times like a much larger ensemble, especially on the first two tunes, but on the stripped down trio version of "The Path," the leader features the deep sound and melodic inventiveness of bassist Hurst as well as his own flowing well-articulated piano work. The next cut, "Elegy," pares the instrumentation down further, as Tucker offers a pensive meditation all by himself, beginning a capella and then ending in a slow tempo with the left hand marking the time; he returns to the solo format on the more modern and complex "E. M. Blues" later in the recital. In turn, "Resilience" begins with a quartet format with Chandler's burry trombone stating the head, which turns into a bass solo before turning once again to Chandler, who romps through the changes in inspired fashion, in a concise solo filled with harmonic and melodic clarity. The full band numbers remind one of various Blue Note groups, especially when Tucker moves over to the electric organ on "Keep on Turnin'."



There is much to like on this inventive and well thought out CD.

Glenn Tucker is also featured in a duo setting with Detroitier **George Benson** on tenor and alto saxophone (***Dreamers***). Benson belongs to a different generation than Tucker, with roots in the Swing Era, enhanced by bebop and then influenced to some degree by the work of John Coltrane

and his associates. He has a characteristic personal sound on his horns, each of which he approaches in a very different manner. His alto saxophone sound combines the creamy approach of players such as Benny Carter with a bluesy inflection akin to Earl Bostic and a slight bite that works so well on ballads and blues. His tenor sound is narrower and more focused but ringing can also be filled with blues inflections. The focus in the duo is on Benson's saxes and Tucker has to work as accompanist as well as soloist. In this context he is more traditional and, following Benson's example, works with blues inflections from various eras and with bebop phrasing and harmonic substitutions much of the time. It is important to note that Benson composed all the tunes on this recital, which digs deep into the timeless essential aspects of jazz in a relaxed and yet emotionally direct manner.



Note should be made of two other recently released CDs. On *The Andy Adamson Quartet – A Cry for Peace* (andyadamsonquartet.org), the pianist and composer/leader works with Dan Bennett (tenor and soprano saxophones), Brennan Andes (acoustic and electric bass) and Jonathan Taylor (drums). The quartet features Adamson's compositions that reflect both the modern jazz mainstream and the fusion approach that the pianist and keyboardist favored in the past. This is a tight band that has developed a close rapport at weekly gigs at the Rush Street bar and restaurant in downtown Ann Arbor. In addition to the leader's fleet and funky keyboard work, the CD provides a setting for the hard hitting, harmonically and melodically inventive tenor saxophone playing of Dan Bennett, whose emotional and technically impressive playing takes central stage throughout.



Finally, there is *Vintage Marcus* (WSJ 006), a compilation of cuts from various records and CDs featuring the late trumpet master **Marcus Belgrave**, taken from Hugh Leal's Parkwood and WJS labels, spanning the years from 1987 through 2002.

It is still hard to come to grips with the fact that Marcus is no longer with us, but this release, which was approved by Belgrave, provides a loving memorial to be savored by all who loved the man and his music. Leal, to whom we must all be grateful for his efforts, worked closely with Belgrave, producing nine recordings featuring his playing and singing and sometimes working with him on the guitar and banjo.



The CD begins with four tunes by the trio of Belgrave, pianist Earl Van Riper and bassist Dave Young. The three men swing easily without benefit of a drummer in an ambitious set of tunes by Cedar Walton, Thad and Quincy Jones, as well as what would become Belgrave's best known composition, "All My Love." This is the only modern jazz section of the CD (the original LP, long out of print, contained another pair of tunes). The next three tunes feature the trumpet man in duet with the wonderful pianist Art Hodes. The rest consists recordings made at concerts, with tributes to Louis Armstrong, with combos that included his great friend saxophonist and clarinetist Charlie Gabriel, and with players of older generations such as trumpeter Doc Cheatham and tenor saxophonist Franz Jackson, both also featured as vocalists, as is Belgrave on occasion. The accompanists include some of Michigan's finest musicians. Throughout, Belgrave plays with an assured brilliance, comfortable in all settings and somehow managing to remain true to his own musical concept, from the more modern stylings of the opening trio tunes to remakings of Louis Armstrong favorites from the twenties.

Although not planned as such, this anthology, provides an apposite tribute to Detroit's beloved Marcus Belgrave, but it may not be easy to find. The CD was produced as a premium for contributions to the WRCJ-FM radio station and also sold at the radio station's booth at this year's Detroit International Jazz Festival. Those who would like to acquire a copy may try to contact Leal via www.hughleal.com.