

Alex Sipiagin *Balance 38-58*

CRISS CROSS JAZZ 1378

★★★★½

There is nothing conventional about the music and performances on trumpeter Alex Sipiagin's *Balance 38-58*. Many of the melody lines (all but the final two David Binney pieces are by Sipiagin) are extremely complex, and it is a fair bet to say that none of these songs will be showing up at jam sessions anytime soon. Due to the superb musicianship of the six musicians and their familiarity with each other (only keyboardist John Escreet is new to Sipiagin's music), their readings of the themes sound effortless and natural.

The title of the CD *Balance 38-58* might make one think that Sipiagin was referring to having a

Alex Conde *Descarga For Monk*

ZOHO 201501

★★★★★

The affinities between Thelonious Monk's music and anything Latin jazz have been evident for a long time. (One of my favorites: Jerry Gonzalez's *Rumba Para Monk*.) And when someone can assist the listener to hear some truly marvelous music anew (in different, innovative and tantalizing ways), I imagine Monk tipping one of his many now-famous hats. I imagine him doing just that to Alex Conde's *Descarga For Monk*.

Everyone of these nine Monk tunes ("Ruby My Dear" is mistakenly listed in place of "Bemsha Swing" on the CD) has an original spin. "Played Twice" opens things with lots of hand-clapping and stepping that serves as the aural replacement of a tango, courtesy of some mean *palmas* and *compas* from Amparo Conde and Carmen Carrasco. More of that bubbly, creative ferment comes with "Thelonious," thanks to John Santos (on congas and cajon) but also the deep woody tone of Jeff Chambers' bass and some rat-a-tat-tat from drummer Jon Arkin. "Monk's Dream," on the other hand, is hampered by a more conventional reading, the uptempo swing somewhat refreshing but less ear-catching. Similarly, "Evidence" meanders through its fun tumbao groove but with less distinction than what we've already heard. Not so with "Bemsha Swing," which, apart from a bit more swinging, heralds a slight return to that slip-

performed life during middle age, but the 38 and 58 actually refer to the range of alcohol content in Taiwan's national drink. However, there is a definite balance throughout this program, with the complex aspects of the music being offset by the warm tones of the soloists, particularly the leader.

All of the musicians make important contributions to the music, especially in the stimulating ways they play behind the lead voices. Escreet (on both piano and Fender Rhodes) and guitarist Adam Rogers constantly push the horns into expected areas; Matt Brewer's bass lines are sometimes funky but never repetitive; and drummer Eric Harland has a creative commentary going throughout. Binney on alto and soprano is a passionate soloist, and Sipiagin, whose brilliant playing sounds like a mix of Woody Shaw and Kenny Wheeler, makes it all sound logical and inevitable.

The album's standout tracks are significant for their complexity. "38-58" is one of the trickier pieces, although the passionate solos make the music seem more accessible. "Way To Her" has a mellower feel with Sipiagin on flugelhorn, even if its melody line is no less complicated, and "Momentum" has a conversational theme with rapid unisons by the horns over a medium-tempo groove.

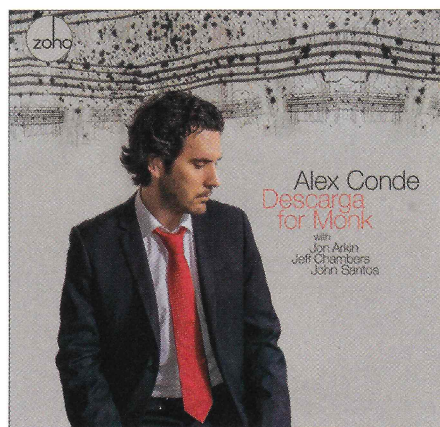
Balance 38-58 will keep listeners guessing while showing how jazz continues to move forward.

—Scott Yanow

Balance 38-58: 38-58; Way To Her; Momentum; Echoes Of Thought; Balance; Yragon; Trio Whale. (62:47)

Personnel: Alex Sipiagin, trumpet, flugelhorn; David Binney, alto, soprano saxophone; Adam Rogers, guitar; John Escreet, keyboards; Matt Brewer, bass; Eric Harland, drums.

Ordering info: crisscrossjazz.com



pery, unpredictable flamenco vibe.

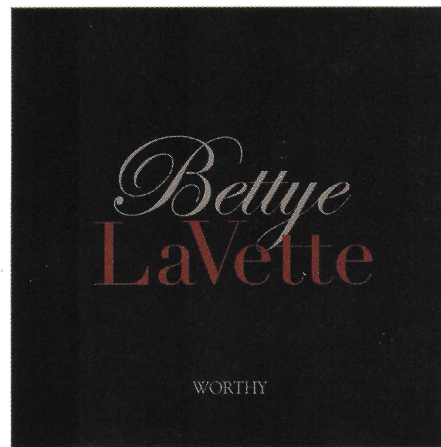
Descarga For Monk is Conde's third release as a leader, the 33-year-old playing beyond his years (no doubt thanks, in part, to the tutelage of Chano Dominguez). The flamenco-imbued spirit of his playing permeates, but his focus rests squarely on Monk's melodies. It's all in the interpretation, they say. And with Conde (who's also a composer), *Descarga For Monk* is as much about the twists and turns as it is in the piano playing. After all, let us not forget Monk was a piano player, too.

—John Ephland

Descarga For Monk: Played Twice; Thelonious; Think Of One; Ugly Beauty; Round Midnight; Monk's Dream; Evidence; Bemsha Swing; Pannonica. (53:58)

Personnel: Alex Conde, piano; Jeff Chambers, bass; Jon Arkin, drums; John Santos, percussion; Amparo Conde, palmas (hand claps, 1, 4); Carmen Carrasco, compas (foot stomps, 1, 4).

Ordering info: zohomusic.com



Bettye LaVette *Worthy*

CHERRY RED RECORDS 6872

★★★★★

About 10 years ago, r&b singer Bettye LaVette collaborated with producer Joe Henry for *I've Got My Own Hell To Raise* (Anti). On that disc, she unleashed the accumulated raw passion and determination that built up during decades when only devoted fans knew her. Since then, she's performed on larger stages, but has retained her sharp musical sense. That discernment includes reuniting with Henry and his core team for *Worthy*. And she continues to interpret a wide range of idioms, with unexpected turns even when covering songwriters she's drawn from before.

LaVette has never been a belter, and she knows that now is no time to start shouting. Her strength comes through showing that she can enter any song in any way she chooses. That includes a loping pace on Bob Dylan's "Unbelievable" or a strut she brings to Henry's "Stop" before whispering in the right places. Alongside Patrick Warren's piano and Chris Bruce's acoustic guitar, she packs an emotional punch within a minimal amount of notes on the plaintive "Where A Life Goes."

While LaVette has covered works by the Rolling Stones and Beatles on *Interpretations: The British Rock Songbook* (Anti, 2010), she continues to find new ways of personalizing their tunes. On "Complicated," she sings as if she is shyly admitting a hidden trait—an approach unimaginable for Mick Jagger. LaVette also dramatically reworks the tempo of John Lennon and Paul McCartney's "Wait" so that it becomes a lament, not the celebration it is on *Rubber Soul*.

"Step Away" is the sole uptempo track on *Worthy*, and even here, LaVette sidesteps an obvious big statement, even with the horn lines echoing '60s r&b. The disc ends with the title track's message of self-esteem, which she sings in a way that promises she's not going away anytime soon.

—Aaron Cohen

Worthy: Unbelievable; When I Was A Young Girl; Bless Us All; Stop; Undamned; Complicated; Where A Life Goes; Just Between You And Me And The Wall; You're A Fool; Wait; Step Away; Worthy. (44:06)

Personnel: Bettye LaVette, vocals; Jay Bellerose, drums, percussion (1-8, 10, 11); Doyle Bramhall II, guitar (1-11), bass (7, 9); Chris Bruce, bass (1-6, 8, 10, 11), acoustic guitar (7, 9); Patrick Warren, piano, Hammond organ, Chamberlin; Ben Chapoteau-Katz, baritone saxophone (10); Levon Henry, tenor saxophone (10); Linton Smith, trumpet (10).

Ordering info: mvdaudio.com