

At Era's End

Jack Bruce, who died last October at age 71, was one of the great jazz-loving musicians in rock. Before earning world renown with Eric Clapton and Ginger Baker as the ultimate '60s power trio Cream, the Scotsman quit his classical studies to play jazz in U.K. clubs. Post-Cream, Bruce collaborated with the likes of guitarist John McLaughlin (*Things We Like*, all free-bop instrumentals), saxophonist John Surman (see *Spirit: Live At The BBC, 1971-78*) and keyboardist Carla Bley (heard on the underrated *Live At Manchester Free Trade Hall, '75*). He joined Tony Williams' rock-inflected Lifetime band, playing and singing on *Turn It Over*. Decades later, in a tribute to Lifetime-era Williams, Bruce teamed with organist John Medeski, guitarist Vernon Reid and drummer Cindy Blackman as the raucous Spectrum Road, which released an eponymous album in 2012.

Bruce expanded the melodic-dynamic role of the bass in rock music, and he was a powerful, fearless singer, his keening vocals pushing toward the sharp edge of a note in a way that could tingle the spine when he was on his mettle. Working mostly with lyricist Pete Brown, Bruce wrote some of Cream's most enduring songs, whether psychedelic rock ("White Room") or smart, hook-heavy updates on the blues ("Politician"). Bruce also composed inspired pieces for his solo albums into the 21st century; in particular, though, his 1969 masterpiece *Songs For A Tailor* yielded songs that he re-interpreted throughout his career.

In 1993, to mark his 50th year, Bruce convened friends old and new in Cologne, Germany, for career-spanning concerts telecast by the venerable *Rockpalast* program. That event's audiovisual record has been reissued as a lavish, warts-and-all three-DVD/CD set, *The 50th Birthday Concerts* (MIG 90612; 119:00/109:00/75:37 ★★). Bruce—who was no teetotaler and would have severe health problems later—sounds in decent-enough shape, but this is a problematic document for those who want to remember the protean musician at his best.

Things begin awfully with a Bach-influenced piece featuring Bruce on cello, out of tune; he moves to piano for a Satie-esque miniature, better. Then he sets things fully right by demonstrating his gift for surprising melody, singing his solo tune "Can You Follow?" Throughout the DVDs, the audio mix isn't attractive, and there are performances made lame by dated keyboard sounds. But it is Bruce's self-indulgent fretless bass at overbearing volume that renders barely listenable several jazzy workouts with Baker and a pre-Cream mentor, saxophonist Dick Heckstall-Smith. Bruce later fronts a fusion-tinged rock combo that blights blues covers and his own songs alike.

What works? Bruce's brassy "Never Tell Your Mother She's Out Of Tune" almost bests the original groove; but a raggedy performance mars the

Jack Bruce



TINA KORHONEN

poetic "Rope Ladder To The Moon." Bruce caps the shows with a run of Cream hits, joined again by a muted, tipping Baker. One evening was supposed to feature Clapton, but stepping in for the no-show was rock-guitar journeyman Gary Moore, whose metallic tone is overwrought, even if his way with "NSU" is undeniably fiery.

Ordering info: mig-music-shop.com

Joe McPhee's 1996 album *As Serious As Your Life* (Hatology 704; 56:48 ★★★) has a Stonehenge-like image on the cover. It feels apt, as his solitary ruminations—on saxophones, cornet, piano and electronic percussion, sometimes overdubbed—have an ancient, ritualistic feel. There are abstractions on George Gershwin, John Coltrane and Sun Ra-meets-Conlon Nancarrow, as well as homages to Miles Davis and author Valerie Wilmer, whose book on '60s-'70s avant-jazz inspired the album title. This remains a master class in the expressive possibilities of solo studio play (especially when McPhee is on tenor), but his closing, James Earl Jones-in-a-cave spoken manifesto should've been cut with the reissue.

Ordering info: hathut.com

Although he moved into film/TV scoring in the late '90s, Canadian guitarist **Jerry De Villiers Jr.** led fusion bands earlier in the decade. He dug into his tapes for the previously unreleased studio and live material of *The Turning Point Archives* (Timeless Momentum 2014; 76:05 ★). His guitar is redolent of late-'80s Joe Satriani (though less virtuoso), and the tunes, plagued by slap bass and horribly dated keyboard sounds, sound like bumpers for old public-access TV shows. **DB**

Ordering info: timelessmomentum.com



Tomoko Omura *Roots*

INNER CIRCLE 037

★★★★½

Tomoko Omura grew up in Shizuoka, Japan, a city that lies not far south of Mount Fuji, one of her homeland's most iconic geographic features. Living in New York, as she does today, the violinist no longer has a natural symbol of her nation standing as a backdrop to her town, but she does carry the traditional songs of her country with her.

Roots, her second album as a leader, brings the music of her childhood memories squarely into the modern jazz world she inhabits today, often to beautiful effect.

The first thing we hear is not her violin but her double-tracked voice; the singing is functional, but all the fireworks come from her fingerboard. On "Tinsagu Nu Hana (Balsam Flowers)" she begins by playing a gorgeous, unaccompanied melody, then warps to another galaxy for her later solo, which calls back to Jerry Goodman's work with Mahavishnu Orchestra.

The well-spaced moments where she plays pizzicato all add a sense of urgent drive; on "Chakkiri-bushi," she nearly fuses with Noah Garabedian's bass, and the result swings hard.

Omura is a deft arranger, calling on her rhythm section to vary the feel and leading the charge through starts and stops. Will Graefe's guitar is a wild card. On "Ge Ge Ge," he plays with a spiky rock tone, shifting through several vastly different moods over the course of a wild solo.

A good leader gets great performances from her band, and Omura provides a framework that brings out the best in her collaborators. *Roots* may look to the past for inspiration, but it showcases a leader with a fine future. —Joe Tangari

Roots: Antagata Dokosa (Where Are You From?); Ge Ge Ge; National Anthem; Kojo No Tsuki (Castle In The Moonlight); Tinsagu Nu Hana (Balsam Flowers); Cha Tsu Mi (Green Tea Picking); The Mountain; Soran-bushi; Chakkiri-bushi; Hometown; National Anthem (Reprise). (59:38)

Personnel: Tomoko Omura, violin, voice; Will Graefe, guitar; Glenn Zaleski, piano, keyboards; Noah Garabedian, bass; Colin Stranahan, drums.

Ordering info: innercirclemusic.com