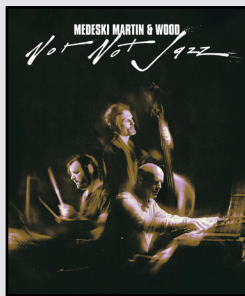


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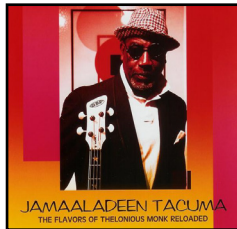


Medeski Martin & Wood: Not Not Jazz
Jason Miller (Oscilloscope Laboratories)
by Paul Gaita

As both a retrospective on Medeski Martin & Wood's (MMW) quarter-century of recording and performing music, and a snapshot of the band recording its first studio album in more than a decade, Jason Miller's documentary *Not Not Jazz* is tastefully executed and provides a solid if occasionally brief retrospective of the trio's history and sound. Where it really succeeds is as an extended and often lyrical meditation on both the seemingly limitless talents of its members—John Medeski (keyboards), Billy Martin (drums, percussion) and Chris Wood (bass)—and the creative impulses that fuel their efforts. The album aspect of the film is encapsulated in its first third, and connects 1996's *Shack-man*, which was recorded in an isolated house in Hawaii, with this current effort's location, the remote Allaire Studios in New York's Hudson Valley. Once the logistics of the operation are addressed, Miller gets down to filming the band in rehearsal, which is a remarkable opportunity to observe their process and the complexity of their compositions. Gear-minded viewers may also appreciate hearing about Wood's century-old stand-up bass or seeing how Medeski manipulates his Hammond organ to produce unique sounds, but the performance scenes—photographed in deft, fluid takes by camera operator Htat Htat—are the moments that transcend the “jazz documentary” label and become exceptional and even beautiful exercises in sound and vision.

The retrospective element incorporates vintage footage from MMW's early days at downtown New York's CBGB, among other live performances, with the trio's own recollections to provide the primary bullet points of their career arc. Most music docs save this section for the raw meat of the bio, but here interpersonal conflicts are largely addressed and dropped; more time is devoted to how the band sanded down its rougher edges (with the help of a therapist) for the sake of their creative pursuits. It's a commendable choice to favor creativity over gossip, and what results is striking footage of the trio addressing the whole of their process in measured but in-depth terms, which often play under lengthy solo performances by each member on the quiet, melancholic grounds of the studio. These prove the most valuable both to the MMW fan and the casual viewer, as they answer key questions: How do you remain in love with music? From where do you draw inspiration when doubt creeps in? What has changed in you and what remains the same? These are philosophical questions for any pursuit in life (music or otherwise) and it's rare that a documentary, especially one as brief (71 minutes) as *Not Not Jazz*, addresses them at length. These quiet but fulfilling inquiries are what sets this apart from the sprawling field of music documentaries.

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The Flavors of Thelonious Monk Reloaded
Jamaaladeen Tacuma (Extraplatte)
Ugly Beauty: The Monk Session
Rubicon Trio (AMP Music)
by John Pietaro



In the evolution of jazz, especially with the dawn of bebop, it is only with Thelonious Monk's music that we find conceptual reconstructions a matter of course. Monk was the *avant* among jazz futurists, leading toward the next *avant* garde. And within a wealth of spectacular Monk reimaginings, Muhil Richard Abrams to Andy Summers, Steve Lacy to the Kronos Quartet, the concepts, happily, rage on.

Jamaaladeen Tacuma, today's primary connection to Ornette Coleman's Harmolodics, cast his vision in a German release from 2007, now made available on these shores. *The Flavors of Thelonious Monk Reloaded* features the leader's masterful improvisations on his signature Steinberger bass, cutting through this live set of tightly rhythmic bebop interpretations of Monk. What may be confusing to some is that Tacuma recorded a different *Flavors of Thelonious Monk* (1994) in tandem with Austrian saxophonist Wolfgang Puschnig, covering some of the same material, albeit in a very different manner. Opening with a Tacuma narration dripping with synthesizers from which “Well, You Needn't” grows as a darkly funky version of the classic bop standard, the album's throbbing intensity remains relentless. The electric bassist's solo on “We See” is utterly shredding, covering the harmonic spectrum with shades of “sheets of sound.” The effect is dizzying. But revel too for the tireless work of percussionist Napoleon Black's conjuring of Elvin Jones as much as Chano Pozo. And locked into the jazz-fusion, which overlays this 14+ minute statement, Black and drummer Tim Hutson heartily propel as aerial keyboardist Orrin Evans maintains the original's stinging crushes and minor seconds. Tacuma's inclusion of his own narration (particularly on “Blue Monk”), as well as moodily recorded statements by others, adds a documentary quality to the tribute. One hears this clearly in the singular “Bemsha Swing”, with Evans' Moog amblings over the rhythm section's pocket groove conjuring mid-period Weather Report.

A whole other Monk vision is heard within the Swedish ensemble, the Rubicon Trio's *Ugly Beauty: The Monk Session*. While the band's guitar-bass-drums line-up is fairly standard in jazz quarters, the distinctly European approach stands far apart from the jam sessions at Minton's, which found Monk in the company of guitarist Charlie Christian. Opening with the relatively rare “Skippy”, the band truly comes into its own brandishing the several brief movements comprising “Brilliant Corners”. This piece, among the composer's most memorable, is heard in all its sinister glory, particularly as Jon Kvarnas' half-time bowed bass guides the ear to Eric Leis' up-tempo electric guitar melody, tossing bits of ‘spy guitar’ into the post-modern gumbo. The title cut, a term with which underdeveloped listeners have used to describe the entire Monk catalog, sits as the trio's perfect atmospheric ballad. Even as Leis glides singingly through the piece, carrying memories of Joe Pass and Emily Remler, the guitarist's forays into chromatic lines remain at the heart of Monk's own. Ditto for “Evidence”, but then Rubicon's take on “Bye-Ya” focuses on the composition's Brazilian core, liltingly. And look out for the swinging *outré* of “Four in One”, a recording that could have been

a lost take on Hal Willner's profound *That's the Way That I Feel Now* '80s Monk tribute.

For more info visit preiserrecords.at and ampmusicrecords.com. Monk birthday tributes are at Birdland Theater Oct. 10-13 (featuring Jon Irabagon, Greg Osby and Uri Caine), The Jazz Gallery Oct. 16 and 18 (featuring Miles Okazaki) and Smoke Oct. 23-27 (featuring Joe Lovano, Kevin Hays and Al Foster). See Calendar.



uNomkhubulwane
Nduduzo Makhathini (Blue Note)
by Tom Greenland

The inspiration for *uNomkhubulwane*, South African pianist Nduduzo Makhathini's eleventh studio album (his third on Blue Note), came as a gift from Zulu goddess uNomkhubulwane while Makhathini was submerged underwater as part of his initiation ritual to become a *sangoma*, or healer. As such, the album is unified not only by a musical theme, but by three meta-musical themes inscribed by the goddess' powers: political resistance to grief and oppression; cleansing and restoration of vital energy; achievement of freedom, grace and abundance through rebirth—each represented by a musical movement. Thus, though the music is calm, placid and meditative on the surface, one senses a deep sense of purpose in its undercurrents.

In contrast to his larger projects, this trio date with bassist Zwelakhe-Duma Bell le Pere and drummer Francisco Mela brings Makhathini's intimate yet forceful piano and vocalizations fully to the fore. The latter range from spoken voice-overs and soft, sung melodies, to hummed falsettos and percussive “click” consonants, adding a fourth layer to the three instruments. The opening movement, “Libations”, includes “Omnyama”, “Uxolo” and “KwaKhangelamankengana”. The album opener shuffles along in 6/8, Makhathini deepening his voice like a preacher as inspiration calls, Mela rolling accents like a flamenco guitarist. “Uxolo”, with its catchy theme and bossa beat, could be a songbook standard. The third track is more disjointed, Mela pulling at the pulse to create a lopsided, hypnotic effect. The second movement, “Water Spirits”, opens with “Izinkonjana” in a relaxed Cape Town gospel groove à la countryman Abdullah Ibrahim, followed by “Amanxusa Asemkhathini”, whose first phrase suggests Ornette Coleman's “Lonely Woman”, though Makhathini's plummeting modal chord shapes and plashing pentatonic sequences suggest McCoy Tyner. “Nyoni Le?” and “Iyana”, both touting the trio's close cohesion, finish the movement. The third and final movement, “Attainment”, includes the ethereal waltz “Izibingelelo” and “Umlayez' oPhuthumayo”, the latter again suggesting Coleman and Tyner's influence, both tracks moving from edgy to smooth, like a turbulent plane flight coming to a soft landing. “Amanzi Ngobhoko” features Mela's adroit and empathetic accompaniment, his rolling tom-toms sounding almost like hand drums, his cross-sticking accents closely synced with Makhathini's vocal clicks. The final cut, the solo piano ballad “Ithemba”, is gracefully peppered with chromatic enhancements.

Though Makhathini's music is guided by rhythms, melodies and harmonies, its ultimate goal