

jAZZ,eh?

STUART BROOMER

By happy coincidence the past few months have seen new releases by many of Toronto's most consistently creative musicians.

The trio of saxophonist Mike Murley, guitarist Ed Bickert and bassist Steve Wallace set a high standard for harmonically sophisticated, lyrical chamber jazz. The group released just two CDs – *Live at the Senator* and *Test of Time* – but each won the JUNO for Best Traditional Jazz Album, the former in 2002 and the latter in 2013. Guitarist Reg Schwager assumed the guitar chair when Bickert retired in 2001, but **Looking Back (Cornerstone CRST CD143 cornerstonerecordsinc.com)** is the first time this configuration of **The Mike Murley Trio** has recorded. The tunes are chosen with rare taste, emphasizing little-heard pieces by great composers, like Billy Strayhorn's *Istfahan* and Antônio Carlos Jobim's *If You Never Come to Me*. It's music of supreme artistry, floated aloft on Murley's distinctive, almost feathery, tenor saxophone sound and the bubbling electric clarity of Schwager's guitar, all of it tethered joyously to Wallace's pulsing bass lines. A rare blend of wistful reflections and soaring freedom make the CD another JUNO contender.

Reg Schwager turns up in another fine ensemble, trombonist **Darren Sigmund's** distinctive septet, on **Strands III (darensigmund.ca)**. Sigmund is an outstanding composer, creating welcoming moods comprised of evocative and elusive harmonies. His music is both warm and cool, dense and transparent, and there's a subtle Latin flavour woven throughout. If his earlier work suggested a strong Wayne Shorter influence, his own identity is everywhere apparent here, its distinctive sound formed by the unusual combination of Eliana Cuevas' wordless voice, his own mellifluous trombone and the expressive wail of Luis Deniz's alto and soprano saxophones, complemented by Schwager, vibraphonist Michael Davidson, bassist Jim Vivian and drummer Ethan Ardelli. *El Encanto*, the only song here with words (Cuevas' own) is particularly compelling.

Fern Lindzon is a rare jazz singer, her strong identity based on nuanced expression, a clear, almost silky voice, and a freedom from the collections of mannerisms that many jazz singers use to distinguish themselves. Instead, her work seems to grow from her solid piano playing and the empathy that exists with her band. For her third CD, **Like a Circle in a Spiral (iatros IMO3 fernlindzon.com)**, she moves deftly between languages and styles, singing songs in Hebrew (*Mishaela*) and Yiddish (*A Malekh Veynt*) with the same idiomatic comfort that marks the more familiar *Windmills of Your Mind*. The most striking piece may be her arrangement of alternative pop songwriter Ron Sexsmith's *Jazz at the Bookstore*, a richly ironic rendition in which accomplished jazz musicians (saxophonist David French, bassist/producer George Koller, vibraphonist Michael Davidson and drummer Nick Fraser) get to "play" jazz musicians.

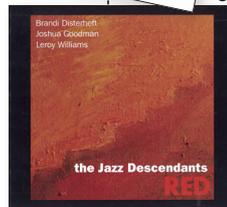
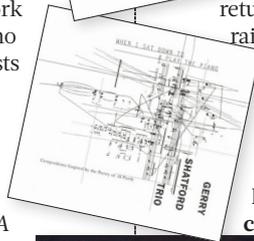
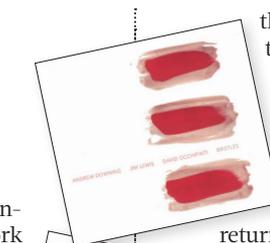
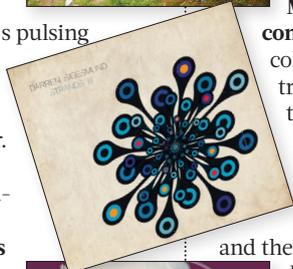
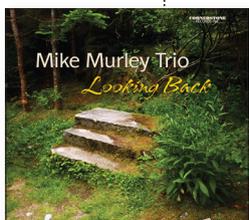
Bassist **Andrew Downing**, trumpeter **Jim Lewis** and guitarist **David Occhipinti** provide comparable surprise on **Bristles (Occdav Music - OMO07, davidocchipinti.com)**, as they alternate a series of brief collective improvisations with longer treatments of standards. Each of the improvisations is named for a 20th-century painter, with a direct methodological link between the repeated even tones and cyclical discords of *Cy Twombly* and the sudden swirling lines of *Jackson Pollock*. The standards are evidently chosen for melodic richness, with the trio exploring the possibilities of such tunes as *My One and Only Love*, *Emily* and *I Fall in Love Too Easily*. There's a spectacular clarity of thought and sound as

the three embellish and reshape their materials, at times turning suddenly from icy abstraction to the most exalted lyricism.

Pianist **Gerry Shatford** worked extensively in the Montreal, Vancouver and Ottawa jazz scenes before returning to Toronto where he was raised. He's been emphasizing composition in recent years, along with studies with master pianist Stanley Cowell, and the results of both pursuits are documented on **When I Sat Down to Play the Piano (gerryshatford.com)**, a suite of pieces inspired by Al Purdy's poetry. Viewed through the great piano tradition of James P. Johnson, Thelonious Monk (his compositions get quoted) and Bud Powell, the poems find analogues in the off-kilter stride of *Home-Made Beer* or the romantic reverie of *How a*

Dog Feels to Be Old. Accompanied here by the ideal rhythm section in bassist Neil Swainson and drummer Terry Clarke, the journeyman Shatford reveals a strong identity of his own.

The Jazz Descendants are another piano trio featuring a relatively unknown pianist with a stellar rhythm section, combining bassist Brandi Disterheft and drummer Leroy Williams with pianist Joshua Goodman, who works regularly in Disterheft's quartet. **Red (Superfran Records SFR0008, superfranrecords.com)** is dedicated to Barry Harris, the respected bop pianist and teacher with whom Williams has long been associated and with whom Goodman has studied. Much of the music is low key, Goodman blending his mainstream jazz and classical influences in a consistently pleasant way. While his reflective *Medley* goes on too long, stretching its pastoral themes to the 14-minute mark, he brings a precise bop touch to the venerable *Scrapple from the Apple*. The best moments come when Disterheft and Williams come to the fore, as on the bassist's potent *Prayer to Release the Troops*. **◉**



Old Wine, New Bottles Fine Old Recordings Re-Released

BRUCE SURTEES

Conductor **Ferenc Fricsay** (1914-1963) was a significant figure in the international music world in the mid-20th century. He was born in Budapest and studied with Bartók, Dohnányi and Kodály at the Budapest Academy of Music. He held several posts before 1945 when he became co-conductor of what would become the Budapest Philharmonic Orchestra and sole director of the Budapest Opera. By the 1950s his interpretive talent was recognized and he was in demand as a guest conductor by leading orchestras. He left the Budapest Philharmonic in 1948 to become music director of the recently formed RIAS Symphony in Berlin. He held that post from 1948 through 1954, then again from 1959 to 1963.

Thanks to Deutsche Grammophon (DGG at the time) who recorded Fricsay working with his

