All That Jazz #1: Obomsawin, Philion & Knuffke



*The first in a series that will alternate irregularly with 'So Much Guitar,' a place to talk about the mountain of amazing *jazz*Whatever meaning that word has these days. happening these days. We are awash in a creative tsunami. Life is good.*

Today, a couple of swinging large ensemble bangers and a delicate serving of chamber jazz from a trio of contemporary masters.

Go. Listen.

Mali Obomsawin: *Sweet Tooth*

Sweet Tooth (Out Of Your Head Records, 2022) is the debut release from Wabanaki bassist/vocalist Mali Obomsawin. The lineage of Native American jazz heroes is imposing – Jimmy Blanton, Thelonious Monk, Jim Pepper, Don Cherry, Kid Ory, Don Pullen, Charlie Parker, the luminous Lena Horne, to drop just a fraction of the names – and Obamsawin's first outing lays solid claim to the heritage. With six original tunes, three of them with lyrics from traditional and contemporary Wabenaki chants, Obomsawin delivers "a suite for Indigenous resistance" that poses a challenge to anyone expecting Native American culture to pander to tired cliché and a simplistic expectation.

"It's the story of my people and why we survived," Obomsawin explains. "This movement is about the lineal and cultural

inheritance that Indigenous people receive from our ancestors.”

Obomsawin’s bass – more than a tad reminiscent of the great Charlie Haden – anchors a rhythm section that features the superb drummer Savannah Harris and guitarist Miriam Elhajli. The front line trio wields a tonal reed range from bass clarinet to the high tones of soprano saxophone around the cornet/flugelhorn of Tylor Ho Bynum. The composition/arrangements echo Carla Bley, especially her work with the Liberation Music Orchestra, while the sections of free creation recall Mingus or the Art Ensemble of Chicago. But even with all those reference points, *Sweet Tooth* stands as an impressively original declaration from a young artist who is clearly here to stay.

Full album releases on October 28. This preview track is built around a 17th century Abenaki ballad, with an arrangement that evokes the brass bands the Jesuits brought to Native reservations as part of their ‘salvation’ mission.

Sweet Tooth by Mali Obomsawin

Ethan Philion: *Meditations on Mingus*

This year marks the 100th birth anniversary of the monument known as Charles Mingus. The man was a giant in every way. He was one of the greatest bass virtuosos of the 20th century, one of the century’s greatest composers, and a bandleader who could spot great rising talent and knew how to bring out the best in them. He was also difficult, profane, prone to outbursts of violence and paranoia. He played with Miles and Monk and Bird and Duke, was muse to an enamored Joni Mitchell, and then up and died in 1979 at the young age of 56.

His widow Sue – who died just over a week ago at age 92 – kept his work alive since the 80s with the Mingus Dynasty project, but aside from that his classic compositions have been sorely under-performed. Aiming to remedy this neglect, Chicago-based

bassist Ethan Philion put together a 10-piece band to perform his arrangements of the Mingus songbook.

Meditations on Mingus (Sunnyside Records, 2022) is a set of eight well-known Mingus classics that reminds us of the melodic bounty and rhythmic heft of Mingus's writing. Mingus wrote at the same level as Ellington, delivering the music that made calling jazz "America's classical music" more than wisenheimer marketing copy.

I can't tell you how hard it was to pick one cut from this set for preview. This is one of my favorite Mingus tunes and it showcases Philion's deep chops on the big bass fiddle.

Meditations on Mingus by Ethan Philion

Kirk Knuffke Trio: *Gravity Without Airs*

Kirk Knuffke seems to be everywhere these days, sideman and collaborator to an astonishing array of musicians, contemporaries (Mary Halvorson, Allison Miller, Myra Melford) as well as venerated elders like Marshall Allen, Roswell Rudd, and Tootie Heath. On *Gravity Without Airs* (TAO Forms, 2022), he delivers some of the most gorgeous chamber jazz of recent memory. Calling to mind the classic Jimmy Giuffre Trio featuring Steve Swallow and Paul Bley – with Knuffke's cornet in the Giuffre clarinet role – the fourteen pieces on *Gravity* are a mix of Knuffke compositions and free form spontaneous creations. Pianist Matthew Shipp is one of the music's current masters. A player steeped in the histories of jazz and classical and possessed of prodigious technical skill, he not only has the entire piano vocabulary at his fingertips, but the wit and discrimination to know exactly what needs to go where/when. Bassist Michael Bisio, a member of Shipp's exceptional trio since 2009, brings huge ears and a massive, earthy tone to the proceedings. The result is pure gold.

This track closes the album with a movingly beautiful melody and the kind of uber-sensitive group listening that makes this

entire double disc set an absolute gem.

Gravity Without Airs by Kirk Knuffke Trio

Go. Ya know….