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YOUR FREE GUIDE TO THE NYC JAZZ SCENE

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ISSUE

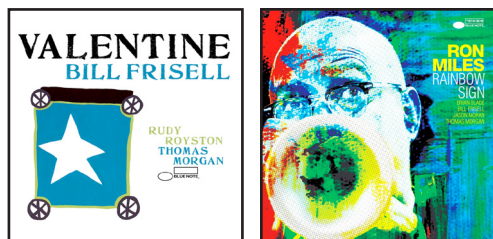
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*Valentine*  
**Bill Frisell (Blue Note)**  
*Rainbow Sign*  
**Ron Miles (Blue Note)**  
 by Thomas Conrad

Defying the pandemic, the Blue Note label has been on a roll. One sure sign: It beat out ECM in the latest *JazzTimes* Critics Poll. Blue Note albums by people like Ambrose Akinmusire, Gerald Clayton, Immanuel Wilkins and Joel Ross were all over the “Best Of” lists for 2020. Here are two more high-level releases from Blue Note, one great (*Valentine*), one very good (*Rainbow Sign*). Both feature the preeminent guitarist of our time, Bill Frisell, the first in his optimal format, the trio, the second in an allstar band. Ron Miles’ other sidemen are no less than Jason Moran, Thomas Morgan (who also appears on *Valentine*) and Brian Blade.

Frisell has played with bassist Morgan and drummer Rudy Royston for years, but they had never recorded as a trio. Frisell intends *Valentine* as “evidence” of this ensemble’s “magic”, which he defines as “everyone trusting each other...you feel safe enough to try anything.” In presenting his evidence, Frisell draws upon his preferred musical genres. There are standards like Billy Strayhorn’s “A Flower Is a Lovesome Thing”. It takes 30 seconds to coalesce from floating guitar figures, but once Frisell has found the song he never truly leaves it, even as he sometimes breaks it off mid-phrase and appends new melodies. There are originals, some new (“Electricity”, a wicked little set of hooks) some old (“Winter Always Turns to Spring”). Frisell has never been sufficiently acknowledged as a composer. He writes tunes so fine they can be played alongside Strayhorn. A representative Frisell album must contain some Americana. “Wagon Wheels” resonates as shared history. There are staples of popular culture like “What the World Needs Now Is Love” that Frisell utterly transfigures in his stinging, glistening, ringing guitar language. There is a traditional, “We Shall Overcome”. It is the final track on *Valentine*. Frisell often closes his concerts with it. He says, “I’m going to keep playing it ’til there is no need anymore.” He sustains the faith of this song while making it new for our present moment.

It is unusual for a major leader to work in other people’s bands, but Frisell, who possesses uncommon energy, curiosity and generosity, has been popping up as a sideman for years. His contributions to *Rainbow Sign* are always vivid and surprising. Overall, it is hard to imagine that Miles could have found four more articulate voices to join him in fleshing out his original pieces. Most were composed in the summer of 2018 while his father was dying. But *Rainbow Sign* never sounds mournful. Its pulsing momentums sound like life. Miles says that he wrote these songs while serving as a caregiver to his father in his last days, during which time the two reached a new level of closeness. Press notes call this album a “spiritual document”.

While Miles’ compositions are stronger in the aggregate than individually, they create, cumulatively, an uplifting sense of affirmation, a glow of tenderness and reconciliation. Miles is the only soloist who stretches out. He plays cornet instead of trumpet, in a warm, open tone and his journeys are always fulfilling, even when, or especially when, they wander off course, like on “Binder”. The other players all practice concentration and concision but they maximize their moments, including drum maestro Blade. Frisell and Moran are both capable of stopping the show. Frisell’s statements are burned into the air of this humane album and the piano interludes have just

enough density and dissonance to remind you that they come from Moran. But it is fitting that *Rainbow Sign* is less about private brilliance and more about communal creativity. Most often the solos are collective ventures, like on “This Old Man”, where everyone including Morgan weaves in and out of Miles’ muted lines. It feels wrong to call *Rainbow Sign* a concept album. It is more like an offering.

For more information, visit [bluenote.com](http://bluenote.com). Frisell live-streams Mar. 6th at [alternativeguitarsummitcamp.com](http://alternativeguitarsummitcamp.com)



*Without Dimensions* (featuring Ben Monder)  
**Júlia Karosi (Doublemoon-Challenge)**  
*Slip Sliding* (with Ben Grayson)  
**Rob Burke/Ben Monder/Tom Rainey (FMR)**  
*Live at the 55 Bar*  
**Ben Monder/Tony Malaby/Tom Rainey (Sunnyside)**  
 by George Grella

Modesty is generally considered a virtue, but too much can be a vice. That may be too strong for music, especially jazz, but it’s a useful metaphor for looking at how guitarist Ben Monder fits into different groups and musical situations. Because fit in he does—a musician’s musician and ensemble player *par excellence*, he often sits in the ambiguous position of being both complementary and the best part of the overall proceedings.

That’s the general case with these three albums. On one, Júlia Karosi’s *Without Dimensions*, his presence makes up a fraction of the music, but he looms large over the whole, to the relative detriment of the leader. On the two albums credited to groups of musicians, he’s often the strongest and most interesting voice and though everyone is trying to play together, the success of the music hangs on how well the other musicians integrate with Monder. The oddity of each situation is that Monder for the most part is playing modestly, following the concepts and values of others.

*Without Dimensions* sits a bit apart from the other two albums. Karosi is a vocalist, to begin with, and it’s a vocal album though one with little in the way of text. The other feature is that the music is centered around Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály, with more than half the tracks being jazz arrangements of themes from the two Hungarian composers. The original material is from Karosi and it is very much flavored by her two Hungarian musical forebears: minor key; lightly dissonant, folk-like melodies; uneven meters. Monder is the featured artist and he’s quoted in the booklet expressing his pleasure to be part of the project and saying, “Bartók has probably been the single most important composer to me.” And he does shine, his fuzzy, distorted tone deliciously doubling the singer’s silvery, pure voice, his solo turns full of energy and commitment and the crunchy wash of his sound in the background on many tracks one of the best things about the album. He’s the most interesting element and in this context brings some slight, but meaningful, disappointment with the record. The melodic and rhythmic contours of Bartók seem to be the only things the leader hears in his music; there’s no exploration of colors (Bartók was an outstanding orchestrator) and nothing that touches on the sexuality and violence that is important in his music, this even with quoting from the Prologue to *Bluebeard’s Castle*. Not a bad record, but a promise hinted at and unfulfilled.

Drummer Tom Rainey is the other common link through the other two albums, both credited collaboratively, though *Slip Sliding* is under the leadership of saxophonist Rob Burke. It’s also the most focused of the two. The last four tracks are a group improvisation, but the rest is organized around Burke’s composed material and there’s further post-production

integration from Ben Grayson, credited with “Electronics and Editing”. Monder and Rainey are a tight rhythm section, the former skillfully defining the tempos and meters of the music, setting the downbeats into which Burke steps and Rainey colors. The various grooves and tune-based music works and Burke is a strong and interesting lead voice with Monder behind him. It’s the improvisations, “Discordat 1-4”, which are hit or miss and where the sheer power and attraction of Monder’s playing overpowers everything else. His colleagues are no slouches, but this feels very much like sandlot ballplayers and Mike Trout.

The *Live at the 55 Bar* trio has the same issues, though the setting makes them less pronounced, and the heights, when reached, are considerable. There are three tracks, “Suite 3320” in three parts, each following the same shape of a quiet, yet dramatic opening, rising in an arc as the musicians improvise. Monder’s playing is mostly about timbre, a multidimensional sound-world into which saxophonist Tony Malaby and Rainey fit. There is time spent in each part as the musicians suggest ideas and circle around each other, then a point where everything gels and the music is magnificent, slabs of involving, expressive sound. It can take some time to get there, though; “Part II” is 29 minutes and it’s only around the last seven where everything comes together. Throughout the album, it sounds like Monder is content to create possibilities for Malaby and Rainey, neither of whom sound quite connected to each other, but when the guitarist takes a more active role, everyone catches fire. If only he was less modest!

For more information, visit [doublemoon.de](http://doublemoon.de), [fmr-records.com](http://fmr-records.com) and [sunnysiderecords.com](http://sunnysiderecords.com). Monder live-streams Mar. 6th at [alternativeguitarsummitcamp.com](http://alternativeguitarsummitcamp.com) and Mar. 10th with Jerome Sabbagh at [smallslive.com](http://smallslive.com).

- R E C O M M E N D E D N E W R E L E A S E S**
- Ab Baars, George Dumitriu, Ig Henneman, Paul Sola Masafrets – *Aforismen Aforisme Aforismes* (Evil Rabbit)
  - Yelena Eckemoff – *Adventures of the Wildflower* (L&H Prod.)
  - Futari – *Beyond* (Libra)
  - Elisabeth Harnik/Paal Nilssen-Love – *Tangram* (Catalytic Sound)
  - Claron McFadden, Kristina Fuchs, Oguz Büyükberber, Tobias Klein – *37FERN* (Trytone)
  - Stephanie Nilles – *I pledge allegiance to the flag – the white flag* (Sunnyside)
  - Tomeka Reid/Joe Morris – *Combinations* (RogueArt)
  - Veronica Swift – *The Bitter Earth* (Mack Avenue)
  - Aki Takase/Christian Weber/Michael Griener – *Auge* (Intakt)
  - Yuma Uesaka/Cat Toren/Colin Hinton – *Ocelot* (577 Records)

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- Hasaan Ibn Ali – *Metaphysics: The Lost Atlantic Album* (Omnivore)
- Don Cherry – *The Summer House Sessions* (Blank Forms)
- Jeremiah Cyerman/Charlie Looker – *A Horizon Made of Canvas* (Astral Spirits)
- Futari – *Beyond* (Libra)
- Alexander Hawkins – *Togetherness Music* (For Sixteen Musicians Featuring Evan Parker + Riot Ensemble) (Intakt)
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