

Jazz

Ry Cooder

Speakers Corner/Warner Bros BSK 3197

180g

2019 gave us too many choices of great music on vinyl, and so many delivered excellent sound too. Two of the three best sounding LP issues of the year, as usual, appeared in the waning moments of last year, and two of the three sound more than vaguely familiar, because they are supercharged versions of records released in earlier years.

Legrand Jazz is a 1958 recording from the best of times and places—a recording made in Columbia's famed 30th Street Studio at the height of the golden age of recording when Columbia had the cream of the jazz world's stars at its disposal. This recording was made to show off that stable of players, and includes performances by, among others, Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Bill Evans and Ben Webster. Each of these star players made better albums, but this gathering of the greats produced an extremely fine performance that never disappoints. Impex released the reissue in a 33 RPM platter, and we gave it the highest ratings for recording and music back in Issue 153. This new 45 RPM two-disc set demonstrates that all top ratings are not created equal. Instrumental texture is the biggest beneficiary of the new mastering by Chris Bellman at Bernie Grundman Mastering—Ben Webster should always sound juicy, but here he is downright succulent.



Legrand Jazz

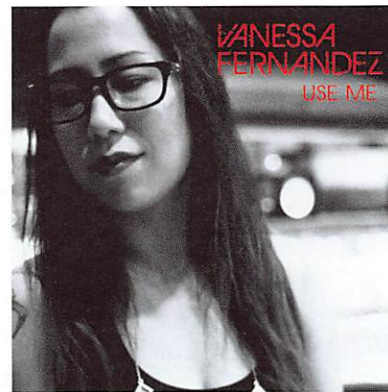
Michel Legrand

Impex/Columbia IMP-6030-45

180g

Add a more seamless soundstage and this is a perfect artefact of Columbia's wedding of the best recording engineers, decks, microphones and hall. In addition, the news fold-out cover embraces a handsome booklet.

Twenty years later the golden age of recording was history, but someone forgot to tell Warner Bros, a company that had been producing great sounding pop records all along. One of its most legendary recordings was Ry Cooder's *Jazz*. Like Paul Simon's 1986 album *Graceland*, Cooder incorporated new musical worlds into his albums. Five years before the soundtrack to the movie *The Sting* made ragtime new again, *Jazz* wove honky-tonk, ragtime and early jazz into what for me is a more enduring soundtrack. The biggest influences are Jelly Roll Morton, Bahamian guitarist Joseph Spence and early jazz cornet legend Bix Beiderbecke yet it does not seem anachronistic like *The Sting* soundtrack. The recording by engineer Lee Hershberg is perhaps Cooder's best sounding release. Mobile Fidelity reissued it in 1984, and it became one of the most sought after (and ridiculously expensive) Mobile Fidelity collectibles. The album did not sell all that well, and original copies are plentiful and cheap. This new version from Speakers Corner was mastered by Kevin Gray and sounds significantly



Use Me

Vanessa Fernandez

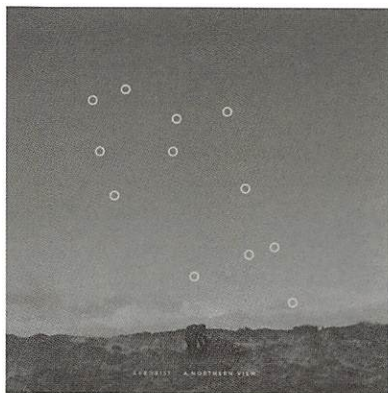
Groove Note GRV-1050-45-1S

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better than the original. There is lots of air around the instruments lending a more three-dimensional feeling to the presentation. The soundstage is a little deeper the sound of the tuba and bass saxophone are lush without lacking in dynamic impact.

From the 21st Century, Groove Note delivers a new One Step Pressing of Vanessa Fernandez's 2014 *Use Me*. Back in 2014 the original version knocked my socks off with its great music and sound. In Issue 118, I noted that the "captivating set of performances covering everything from Barry White to Curtis Mayfield to Al Kooper" had "jaw-dropping sound." Thus, my expectations were low that a do over of the original two LP 45 RPM set could sound even better. The One Step process has been used by Mobile Fidelity in ten deluxe box sets. The improvements of this One Step release from Groove Note are not subtle—sure the dynamics are more striking, but it's the voice that amazes with less sibilance and smoother delivery. If there is a more impressive sounding modern recording of the human voice, I haven't heard it.

These three impressive sounding albums show that record producers did not rest on their laurels in 2019. The golden age of vinyl reproduction went platinum! Pull these albums out next time your house guest asks, "you mean they still make vinyl?" **DD**



A Northern View

Arborist

(Rollercoaster Records)



Northern Irish singer-songwriter Mark McCambridge – the main man behind Arborist – has a great knack for combining truly beautiful music with dark, unsettling lyrics. From the outset of the Belfast-based band's second album *A Northern View* – the follow-up to 2016's critically acclaimed debut, *Home Burial*, things aren't quite what they seem...

The first song, *A Stranger Heart*, begins with lush, uplifting orchestration, before it suddenly comes to a shuddering halt and, after a few seconds is replaced by a low organ, delicate guitar and McCambridge's rich, soaring vocals. You'll be convinced that you've got a faulty copy of the record, but don't worry, it's purely intentional – designed to create a sense of unease.

The track soon picks up again – turning into a swooning, Elbow-like epic, with towering strings and heavenly backing vocals, as McCambridge sings of “the taste of your blood on the tip of my tongue.”

It's a dramatic way to open the album and is followed by another anthemic song, *Here Comes The Devil*, which has a shadowy undercurrent and deals with the subject of people's unspoken or subconscious prejudices.

First single, *Taxi*, is a red herring – standing out from the rest of the record, it's a captivating spoken word track, inspired by the Scottish indie sounds of Arab Strap and Belle and Sebastian,

and is based on an apocryphal rock 'n' roll story told by McCambridge's father's cousin. It's moving, sad, and, ultimately, very funny, with a great twist. No spoilers here...

Arborist began as a solo project for McCambridge, but he was later joined by drummer/ engineer Ben McAuley. For their first album, which was nominated for the Northern Irish Music Prize, they recruited other musicians and now the line-up includes James Heaney – nephew of the late poet Seamus Heaney – on bass, Jonny Ash (guitar) and Richard Hill (piano/organ).

On *A Northern View*, they're accompanied by violinist Emma Smith (Noel Gallagher, James Yorkston), who is responsible for the sublime string arrangements, which adorn many of the songs. Talking about making the successor to *Home Burial*, McCambridge, who had written all the songs for this album ahead of the recording sessions, said: “Melody was still paramount, but I wanted the listener to work for it a little more.”

Recorded at Peter Gabriel's Real World Studios, near Bath, McCambridge's aim with *A Northern View* was to capture the live sound of the band as much as possible – the studio's famous Wood Room, which has high ceilings and warm, rich acoustics, is said to have inspired the musicians.

It sounds like it did the trick... Listening to the record is a lovely, immersive experience and the performances are outstanding, with a real depth to them.

The folksy *Don't Let The Sky Take Me* – a song about where McCambridge hails from – is fragile, gorgeous and intimate.

Can I Add You To My Will? brings some Southern soul to the Northern Irish sound – over some Stax-like horns, McCambridge asks, “who's going to love you when I'm old, frail and ill? Can I add you to my will?” It's a tender and affecting moment on one of the album's best songs. Another highlight is the honest, soulful and tear-jerking country ballad, *Too Much On My Mind*, with plaintive organ, violin and a terrific twangy guitar solo.

Sounding like a Northern Irish Hank Williams, McCambridge is seeking solace in the bottle and tells us: “Well, I haven't seen the sunshine in nearly a month – I've retreated, I've drawn the blinds. I need some space so I can unwind, but I've got too much on my mind.” He has described this album as an ode to Northern Ireland and a reaction against what he calls “the abomination of Brexit.”

The majestic, six-minute title track, which closes the album, juxtaposes jagged electric guitar with triumphant brass and haunting strings, and has some wonderful, evocative imagery inspired by the landscape of McCambridge's home country: “I was born at the edge of a dark and restless sea... I've seen the sunset bleeding through an evening sky...” Listening to it feels like you're standing on the cliff edge and looking out across a stormy ocean.

A Northern View is breathtaking and simply stunning. **SH**