

The Wire & The Guardian Winter 1989

★ these we dig of yore

People new to the music may think there are only two eras –

Jazz Now and Jazz BC (Before Courtney). But a cache of

not-so-old New Sounds awaits those who are ready to dig

it. Graham Lock takes up pen, pickaxe and pith-helmet to

unearth ten recorded treasures of Britain's recent jazz past.

ABSTRACT

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Joe Harriott Quintet

(1961/62, Columbia)

MODERN BRITISH jazz begins with Joe Harriott, the Jamaican-born altoist who evolved a concept of "free form" music in the late 1950s unaware that Ornette Coleman was doing likewise on America's West Coast. While Coleman's ideas changed the course of jazz, Harriott's more varied and sweeping experiments were confined to three LPs – *Free Form*, *Abstract*, *Movement* – made between 1960 and 1963 and tragically unavailable for the last 25 years. Harriott's "free" compositions usually retained one element of standard jazz per track but otherwise eschewed set rhythmic and harmonic patterns, relying on group rapport to shape the improvisation. On *Abstract*, regarded as his finest LP, the quintet (with Shake Keane, trumpet; Pat Smythe, piano; Coleridge Goode, bass; Phil Seamen or Bobby Orr, drums) cohere seamlessly through the prowling pulse changes of "Shadows" and a breezily free-form "Compound", while the sheer vivacity of their playing colours in the complex landscapes of "Subject", "Modal", "Pictures", "Idioms" – all among the more abstract examples of Harriott's visionary desire to "paint freely in sound".

EXTRAPOLATION

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John McLaughlin

(1969, Marmalade; reissued Polydor)

JOHN McLAUGHLIN left Britain in 1969 and quickly found celebrity as jazz-rock's electric-guitar hero with Miles Davis and his own Mahavishnu Orchestra. But a few

months before his departure he recorded a semi-acoustic jazz quartet LP which many still believe is his best. In retrospect, *Extrapolation* is practically a super-group record; it features a young John Surman on baritone and soprano saxes, plus a rhythm section of Tony Oxley, Yorkshire's pioneering free drummer, and respected session bassist Brian Odges. Fortunately, the music itself is far removed from super-group grandstanding: the focus is on sensitive interplay, subtle response; and the quartet – attentive, attuned – mesh superbly on all of McLaughlin's varied compositions – the bebopish title-track, the delicate ballad "Argen's Bag", the proto-jazz-rock licks of "Binky's Beam".

CHRIS MCGREGOR'S BROTHERHOOD OF BREATH

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(1970, Neon/RCA)

IN 1965 the Blue Notes hit the London scene and proceeded to redirect the future of British jazz. Led by pianist Chris McGregor, the South African group also included tenor saxophonist Dudu Pukwana, trumpeter Mongezi "Feza", bassist Johnny Dyani and drummer Louis Moholo. All have made their marks individually, but there has been a special *frisson* whenever they've played together, either in the Blue Notes or as the core of McGregor's big band, Brotherhood Of Breath, a dynamic melting-pot of UK improvisers. The Brotherhood's uniquely joyful row mixed African folk forms with avant-garde jazz, tightly-reined section-playing with exuberant free-form solos. Their first LP may still be their best, if only for Pukwana's fiery eloquence on "Davashe's Dream" or the sonic kaleidoscope of McGregor's extended "Night Poem".

GNU HIGH

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Kenny Wheeler

(1975, ECM)

KENNY WHEELER, the Canadian trumpeter who settled in Britain in 1952, and Dave Holland, the Wolverhampton-born bassist who left the UK in 1968, have been criss-crossing the Atlantic to play on each other's records since their paths first crossed in London's 1960s improvising scene. Though extremely self-critical – he once remarked that "I don't have any solos of my own that I like completely, only those that are not as bad as others" – Wheeler is widely acknowledged as a consummate brass virtuoso and a fine composer, whose bucolic themes are well-suited to his fine-spun lines and burnished tone. *Gnu High*, with Holland, Keith Jarrett (piano) and Jack DeJohnette (drums), is the first of his four LPs for the German ECM label: all are recommended, though *Gnu High* has a sense of spaciousness, intimacy and unhurried assurance that makes it a personal favourite. Holland's quintet, which features Wheeler, has made three albums, also for ECM; these favour a spikier, less romantic ambience than the trumpeter's LPs.

UPON REFLECTION

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John Surman

(1979, ECM)

JOHN SURMAN first came to prominence playing baritone sax in the Mike Westbrook big bands of the 1960s. By the turn of the decade he had become one of Britain's most lauded instrumentalists (supplementing baritone with soprano sax and bass clarinet), a reputation he further enhanced in the early