

# Jazz, world, folk

## Julia Hülsmann Trio

Imprint

★★★★★



(ECM)

With last year's excellent *The End of a Summer*, German pianist Hülsmann's ECM debut finally brought the kind of attention her harmonically adventurous trio has deserved for more than a decade. Hülsmann sometimes hints at what a Bill Evans trio might have sounded like in the era of Brad Mehldau and the Bad Plus. She loves simple chord vamps that slowly change voicings or are nudged and pulled by the bass and percussion, and her entrancing compositions glow vividly through the freest of improv variations. The opening *Rond Point*, a succession of tonal-centre shifts over a steadily pulsing beat, shows off the essence of her magic, as does *Grand Canyon*, with its hissy cymbal sounds and surging basslines. Hülsmann mostly holds her jazz-improv skills back, but develops fluent runs on the hypnotic *A Light Left On*, applies an urgency to the rocking, pop-ish (*Go and Open*) the *Door* and the funky *Ritual*, and saves her most jazzy exuberance for the closing *Who's Next*. **John Fordham**

## The Unthanks

Last

★★★★★



(EMI/Rabble Rouser)

The Unthanks experiment continues, with an album of gentle melancholia that matches their most elaborate instrumental arrangements to date with a reworking of a startling variety of songs. As ever, their music centres around the delicate, haunting vocals of the Unthank sisters, Rachel and Becky, but Rachel's husband Adrian McNally is playing an increasingly important role as producer, pianist, co-arranger and composer of the gently epic title track. Based around a sturdy, drifting piano theme, it's a thoughtful, sad and lyrical meditation on "why the future doesn't

look so great". Elsewhere, there's more epic gloom with an unlikely revival of King Crimson's *Starless*, now based around trumpet and strings, while other cover versions include a breathy treatment of Tom Waits's *No One Knows I'm Gone*, and Jon Redfern's slow, sad reflection on the Iraq war, *Give Away Your Heart*. The traditional songs do little to change the mood, but include some fine harmony singing and violin work on Canny Hobbie Elliot, a quietly eerie *Gan to the Kye*, and impressive piano work on *The Galloway Lad*. There's not the emotional range of the last *Unthanks* album, *Here's the Tender Coming*, but it's a bold and highly original set. **Robin Denselow**

## Steve Lehman/Stephan Crump

Kaleidoscope & Collage

★★★★★



(Intakt)

The US saxophonist and composer Steve Lehman made his British debut in January, but this duo set with the brilliant multigenre Memphis bassist Stephan Crump showcases his innovative melodic approach on alto sax rather than the big-ensemble music of that trip. Lehman, who fuses adventurous postbop with contemporary-classical harmonic approaches, is an original thinker who will be one of the transforming figures of early 21st-century jazz. Though this fine session certainly confirms that, he demonstrates a tonal delicacy and impulsiveness that may bring Lee Konitz to the minds of some. There are just two long tracks, in which Lehman hums repeat-note patterns against Crump's graceful rejoinders, skims fast boopish runs over the bassist's hard-struck riffs and emphatic accents, purrs in the alto's lower depths against pattering hand-drum sounds on the woodwork, or massages multiphonic abstractions over sliding bowed figures. For all the austerity of the lineup and the radicalism of Lehman's outlook, it's a session of immense

musicality, unclipped grooviness and accessibility - with the motivically varied and busy Terroir and the mostly lyrical and texture-rich *Voyages* having significantly different identities. **JF**

## Kurt Elling

The Gate

★★★★★



(Concord)

This pop-angled album from dazzling Chicago singer Elling, produced by Bonnie Raitt and Rolling Stones collaborator Don Was, features tracks like King Crimson's *Matte Kudesai* and *Earth, Wind and Fire's After the Love Is Gone*. But his improv ingenuity consistently sidesteps clichés, and *The Gate* is far from a bland set of adult-contemporary classic-pop covers. *Matte Kudesai*, delivered as a pensive drifter coloured by John McLean's guitar slurs and some vocal-harmony overdubbing, opens the set in a seductive trance, before Joe Jackson's *Steppin' Out* showcases pianist Laurence Hobgood's apposite contribution. The phrasing of Norwegian Wood seems to be stretching too hard to distinguish itself from the original, and Stevie Wonder's *Golden Lady* tends towards formulaic soul-jazz, but a dreamy *Blue in Green* is a tour de force. **JF**

## Gary Husband

Dirty & Beautiful Vol 1

★★★★★



(Abstract Logix)

For his tight funk-drumming creativity, melodic and harmonic sense (he's as good a jazz pianist as he is a drummer) and musical inclusiveness, the UK's Gary Husband has the pull to assemble an all-star studio venture boasting the likes of guitarists John McLaughlin, Allan Holdsworth, Robin Trower, Steve Topping and Steve Hackett, McLaughlin's former Mahavishnu partners Jan Hammer (keys) and Jerry Goodman (violin), Husband's former Level 42 boss Mark King and more. It's



unapologetic jazz-fusion, but being Husband's project it's a subtle one, full of poetic synth effects, hard-nosed bluesy grooving, and flying fast guitar-led themes. Sometimes the leader just jams on squelching synths with his own overdubbed drums; sometimes he drives elegant rock ballads like the yearning Moon Song with Steve Hackett's singing guitar. And the sinister, looming Boulevard Baloneyo is an electronic odyssey for Husband, Holdsworth and bassist Jimmy Johnson. It's a fusion fan's dream, but jazzy and quirky enough for a wider audience. **JF**



The Unthanks

**Asha Bhosle and Shujaat Khan**

Naina Lagaike

★★★★★



(Saregama)

Veteran superstar crossover pop, Indian style. Asha Bhosle may now be in her late 70s, but the queen of the Bollywood playback singers is still in remarkably fine voice on an album in which she's joined by the classical singer and sitar player Shujaat Khan, son of one of the country's finest-ever sitar players, Ustad Vilayat Khan. It's an intriguing combination, but those expecting an album of brave pop-classical fusion work will be disappointed, for both sides play it safe. Khan provides relaxed, melodic settings for traditional lyrics, and the songs are, for the most part, easy-going and gently rhythmic, to which he adds occasional sitar flurries, with just one extended solo. He's an easygoing, soulful singer, and contrasts well with the slightly more emotional Bhosle, who is at her best on her solo treatment of Naina Lagai Ke, a song which mysteriously appears three times (two solo versions and a duet). The result is a pleasant if sometimes soporific easy-listening set that doesn't match her best film work or her recordings with Kronos Quartet. **RD**

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