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About Birds and Bees Helmut Kagerer (Acoustic Music)
Gongfarmer 36 Jim McAuley (Long Song)
American Grace Eric Hofbauer (Creative Nation Music)
 by Tom Greenland

With limited possible combinations of hand positions to sound notes and generate contrapuntal ideas, the guitar is a challenging instrument to perform solo. Three recent releases show three unique and creative solutions to these inherent difficulties.

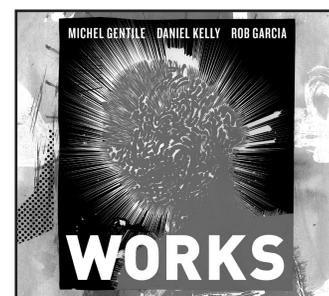
German guitarist Helmut Kagerer, a protégé of Attila Zoller, is steeped in the mainstream jazz guitar tradition and an impeccable craftsman. On *About Birds and Bees*, he performs standards, three Zoller tunes, a bit of Bach and a lesser-known Pat Martino piece with verve and taste, handling melody, chordal accompaniment, basslines and percussive effects in a manner reminiscent of Joe Pass, seamlessly shifting between these various textures and techniques to create the illusion of a small group session. Excellent examples of this include "Giant Steps", featuring a lyrical solo line through the tune's notoriously angular changes; "Ain't Misbehavin'", with masterful chording under the melody; and the B minor partita segueing into "My Funny Valentine". This approach would be hackneyed if not for Kagerer's immaculate technique, bouncy swing, imaginative harmonic language and spur-of-the-moment ambiance, qualities that make this highly listenable recording an inspiration for fellow guitarists.

Jim McAuley's second solo release, *Gongfarmer 36*, is a followup to 2005's *Gongfarmer 18*, which introduced the LA guitarist's avant-acoustica to a wider audience. A mixture of inner- and outer-spaces, McAuley's musical cosmology is both sparse and expansive, constrained and amoebic, a sound grounded in bare-boned Mississippi Delta slide blues, often hunkering on a single-note drone, yet at the same time embracing an ethic of never-repeat-anything-you-did-before... ever. The results are not easy to describe, but the artistry is palpable. Tracks like "Second Blooming" and "Una Lunga Canzone" evince an affinity for flamenco techniques like rasqueado (finger strums), tremolo and golpas (rapping) whereas "Nika's Waltz" sounds a bit like the opening of a raga performed on sarod (Indian fretless lute). There are many 'blue notes': the microtonal clusters over Travis-picked bass notes on "Blues for John Carter"; the swooping Hawaiian steel slides on "The Eyelids of Buddha" and the diddley-bow triplets of "Saltarello/Jumpstart". On "Another November Night" McAuley's unorthodox orchestration mimics a koto while the shuffling and scratching of "Joy Buzzer" are more ambiguous. But these are only approximations of what you might hear for yourself.

American Grace is the final volume of a trilogy Eric Hofbauer began a decade ago with *American Vanity* (2004), followed by *American Fear* (2010). A rugged individualist, the guitarist exposes the angst-ridden underbelly of the American dream through a series of unflinching portraits, including an 18th century sacred harp hymn ("Idumea") redressed as a blues moan; a dazzling transcription of Satchmo's "West End Blues" that manages to sound both radical and traditional; a tender take on The Beatles' "Dear Prudence" with forays into unrelated keys and uneven beat structures; a cover of "Stella by Starlight" harmonized beyond recognition and a dramatic improv ("Pocket Chops") meandering along the slipstreams of consciousness.

Hofbauer too can play out of a Joe Pass bag, as on "Cheer Up, Charlie" (from the Willie Wonka movie) or Cyndi Lauper's "True Colors", which is subjected to an amazing variety of harmonic prestidigitations, but he is never predictable. And Hofbauer is also a down-to-Earth outerspaceman who launches his most far-flung sonic rockets from the most basic of materials: hymns, blues and functional harmony. From the hustling dobro shuffle of "God Moves on the Water" and swing freebop of "Mileage", "Today, All Day" and "And So It Goes" to the rampant polytonality of "Guess I'll Hang My Tears out to Dry", *American Grace* proves a worthy closer to an impressive series.

For more information, visit acoustic-music.de, longsongrecords.com and erichofbauer.com. Hofbauer plays solo at Ibeam Brooklyn Sep. 14th. See Calendar.



WORKS
 Michel Gentile/Daniel Kelly/Rob Garcia
 (Connection Works)
 by David R. Adler

Flutist Michel Gentile, pianist Daniel Kelly and drummer Rob Garcia aren't just trio mates but business partners, overseeing the nonprofit Connection Works as it programs concerts and educational events in Brooklyn. WORKS, their co-led trio, is a house band of sorts, collaborating regularly with high-profile guest artists in the Brooklyn Jazz Wide Open series.

WORKS has also developed its own repertoire over the years, highlighting the compositional gifts of its members. The debut CD gathers these original pieces and shines some overdue light on Gentile, Kelly and Garcia as players and co-thinkers. Their union of flute, piano and drums is a wonderful thing: softly textured, harmonically expansive, percussively engaged and intense, all in the right proportion.

Kelly is the band's de facto bassist, taking charge of the energized low-end lines in Garcia's "Island" and "Will" and Kelly's own "Emanglons", among others. But Kelly is also prominent as a melody voice, doubling many flute parts while keeping chordal ideas flowing. Of anybody in WORKS it seems Kelly's job is the hardest, though he doesn't let it show.

The trio members each play a brief "Soliloquy" - just one of the ways they show their subtlety as individuals. Together they handle the challenges strewn throughout Kelly's galloping "Hundertwasser", with a 6/8 theme that shifts ingeniously to 5/8 when the melody returns midway through. Gentile's "Voir Dire", in contrast, opens with a fast quasi-serialist motive and later breaks away to free improvisation. There's a quieter side too, in the romantic chanson vibe of Gentile's out-of-tempo "C'est Bien Ça" and the dark ambiguity of Kelly's "Chorale".

The category stumpers are Garcia's "Spring Comes 'Round" and the closing track, Gentile's "Commodius Vicus". The former is angular and jazzy, free of tempo, but detouring into chamber-like passages and ending on an ominous straight-eighth vamp. The latter generates maddening spirals of counterpoint - melodic and rhythmic - between flute and piano, framed by hip and understated groove accents. There isn't a stronger example of the trio's uniqueness and ability.

For more information, visit connectionworks.org. Gentile, Kelly and Garcia are at ShapeShifter Lab Sep. 15th as part of Joseph Jarman's 76th Birthday Celebration. See Calendar.