

The Original Instrument

The human voice was the first musical instrument, creating sounds only limited by the singer's imagination. On their self-titled debut, **säje** (Independent Release; 50:26 ★★★★★), **säje** stretches out to explore those limits. The quartet — Sara Gazarek, Amanda Taylor, Johnaye Kendrick and Erin Bentlage — all have thriving solo careers and came together to share their love of composing and arranging. They chose the material and produced the sessions together. On the opening track, "Desert Song," Bentlage fingerpicks a ukulele as the quartet's harmonies and melismas describe the peace emanating from ocean waves and desert sunshine. The song was nominated for a Best Arrangement, Instrument and Vocals Grammy after its release as a single in 2020. On "Wisteria," the core trio of players — keyboardist Dawn Clement, bassist Ben Williams and drummer Christian Euman — hold back as the women step out, using their voices as instruments to weave a rich musical tapestry. "Solid Ground/Blackbird" blends Michael Kiwanuka's song of self-reliance with the familiar Beatles song. The women use soaring harmonic interplay to intensify feelings of dread and liberation.

Ordering info: sajevoices.com

New York's **Allan Harris** is a prolific singer, composer and guitarist with 12 albums to his credit. **Live At Blue Llama** (Love; 66:02 ★★★★★) showcases his rich baritone, as he brings new life to a collection of standards and original compositions. The performances were recorded over two evenings and present many aspects of his vocal skills. He croons, growls, hums and sprinkles understated melismas throughout "Jeannine" and his own "New Day." His command of scat singing is impressive on his rendition of "The Very Thought Of You," while his interpretation of Eddie Jefferson's vocalese lyrics for Miles Davis' "So What?" is also notable. The piano work and arrangements of Arco Iris Sandoval shine.

Ordering info: loveproductionsrecords.com

Lenora Zenzalai Helm composed the suite of songs that make up **Journeywoman** (Zenzalai Music; 61:40 ★★★★★) in 2003. She put off recording most of it as she went through a process of rearranging and distilling the music and vocals into their current form. Backed by her Tribe Jazz Orchestra Nonet, Helm presents the story of a Black woman's path through the joys, frustrations and harrowing realities of life. "Beauty," a bluesy ballad, opens things on a high note, with Helm's trills and extended notes describing the spiritual beauty of womankind. Her restrained vocals heighten the drama of "Sweet Sixteen," a tale of abuse and revenge, with Salome Bey's smooth saxophone solo



säje explores the limits.

adding a touch of solace. Helm returns to more uplifting subjects on the swinging "Sister Joy" and the bossa nova title track.

Ordering info: lenorahelm.com

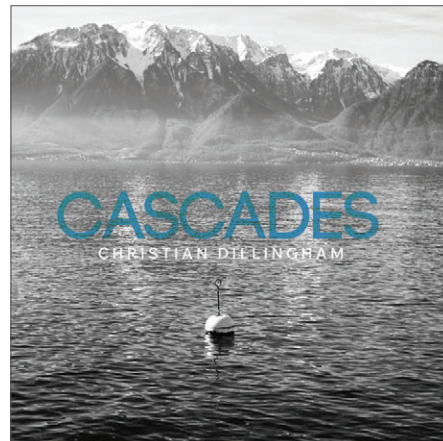
Double Grammy winner **Jack Jones** has a large catalogue of swing, pop and jazz albums to his name. He cut **ArtWork** (BFD; 66:09 ★★★★★) with the help of his friend Joey DeFrancesco, who died shortly after the session's completion, giving the project a bitter-sweet aura. The tunes are pop standards, given Jones' usual discrete treatment. He sings Peggy Lee's rewrite of "Fever" with cheeky ad libs, backed by DeFrancesco's minimal organ. DeFrancesco also adds his melancholy touch to "This Masquerade," complementing Jones' aching vocal. Jacques Brel's "If You Go Away" is a subtle tearjerker with a full orchestra, as is the album closer "One Day," with Jones' poignant delivery undercutting the upbeat lyric.

Ordering info: jackjones.lolipop.jp

Douyé brings an African feel to her take on the Great American Songbook on **The Golden Sekéré** (Rhombus; 62:38 ★★★★★). Born in Lagos, Nigeria, the singer grew up listening to American pop, R&B and jazz, as well as African stars like Fela Kuti. On **Golden Sekéré**, she enlists the help of several American-based African compatriots, including Lionel Loueke, Dapo Torimiro and Baba Ken Okulolo. Their arrangements lean into her Nigerian roots, while her vocals display the subtle warmth of a seasoned jazz singer. "Speak Low" has a laid-back Afro/Latin groove, with Douyé's almost whispered vocal adding fervor to the song's prayer for love and connection. "I've Got You Under My Skin" appears twice: once with a big band augmented by a dynamic African percussion section, and again in a lowkey Palm Wine Music arrangement that emphasizes the quiet fervor of Douyé's singing.

DB

Ordering info: rhombus-records.com



Christian Dillingham *Cascades*

GREENLEAF

★★★★½

Open-eared bassist, composer and bandleader Christian Dillingham, whose resume ranges from Alarm Will Sound to Chico Freeman to Kirk Franklin, is of two or more minds when it comes to genre "code switching." This much is telegraphed in "The Bottoms," the opening track to his debut album, *Cascades*. While fundamentally a straight and tuneful medium-heat jazz tune, the solo section turns abruptly left, with guitarist Dave Miller doubling up on the snaky solo section, each voice at microtonal odds with the others à la Ornette Coleman's Prime Time.

If the discourse on that track leaves us a bit confused, the rest of the eclectic 10-track program adheres to more recognizable identities. His nimble quartet proceeds with highly empathic ease across the shuffle-turned-bop "Like No Other," the rock-tinged snarl of "Code Switch" and the atmospheric murk of "Lost In Desolation."

One of the standout tracks, "One Breath," contrasts its rhythmic bed of fast swing/briskly walking bass with slow, long-toned languidness from the distorted guitar and saxophone, an effective duality that melts into abstraction. But soon after, we land in an almost unabashed pop-soul zone with "Homeostasis" and the gospel-flavored "Undulation." Here, the production values and acoustic disconnect of remote "room"-sounding drums and the upfront clarity of the other instruments becomes a distraction.

More artful rewards are in store on the open, airy ambience — plus odd-time melodic riff — of "No Froust" and the lovely, darkish waltz ballad "Someday Soon." *Cascades* flows in several impressive directions, a promising debut for Dillingham despite the occasional sideways slide into less-alluring musical turf. —Josef Woodard

Cascades: The Bottoms; Like No Other; South State Line Road; One Breath; Lost In Desolation; Homeostasis; No Froust; Undulation; Someday Soon; Code Switch. (65:12)

Personnel: Christian Dillingham, bass; Lenard Simpson, alto and soprano saxophone; Dave Miller, guitar; Greg Artry, drums.

Ordering info: greenleafmusic.com