

The Best of 2021 - Kimbrough, And So Much More

It's Winter, and, as I write, the wind chill is sub-zero here in the curtilage of Lake Erie, a great lake that's doing its best to overcome what we've done to it. It could use a little help.

The last two years have shown – sometimes as bracing instruction, sometimes as gentle reminder – that we can all use a little help. Art offers us that help in the most humane and democratic way imaginable: never forcing us to act against our will; never lying to us; never carnival-barking to our weaknesses and lowest instincts; never . . . well, you know.

It was, to the extent I am able to comfortably assess, a good year for fiction, another art form that is morphing to find a niche in an ever-frantic consumerist world. But the Year in Jazz? For an interested but amateur listener like myself, it's been a soothing soundtrack, a source of comfort and hope, as ever. As I said, it's deep Winter, but the mood here is Autumnal. Perhaps that explains, at least in part, why the monumental multi-artist tribute to Frank Kimbrough, the pianist who died in December 2020, rose singularly above dozens of other great releases and seems to me to be the album of the year. Issued by the folks at Newvelle, *Kimbrough* presents sixty-one of Frank's tunes, performed by some of the best musicians in the world in shifting combinations of instruments and shimmering diversities of tempo, tonality, and mood.

Frank was a friend. He was gracious, gentle, humorous (with a beguiling wry half-smile), and endlessly committed to the music, and to his muse, which took him on journeys: from the quietest recordings of lullabies; to revelatory pairings with Joe Locke and various dynamic trios; to his anchoring the rhythm section as the foundation of the great Maria Schneider's arching orchestral imaginations; to the intricacies of the Herbie Nichols Project, which he co-led with the bassist Ben Allison, unearthing and reviving Nichols's incomparable compositions, preserving their mysteries and presenting them for another generation to explore; and so much more. Seeing Frank live was a treat, particularly watching him in a trio setting with a familiar bassist and drummer. You could see the interplay as the musicians' eyes met; and you could feel the musical empathies, layered, comforting, and occasionally surprising, even to Frank.

Our last in-depth conversation was about his project to record *all* of the compositions of Thelonious Monk, which was released in 2018 as the six-disc *Monk's Dreams*. In the company of the bassist Rufus Reid, the drummer Billy Drummond, and the multi-reedist Scott Robinson, Frank assayed Monk's work -- seventy tracks in all – with deep respect, exquisite sensitivity, and peerless virtuosity. Until and unless you heard it, the task would seem an unimaginable summiting. Frank knew both parts of that idea – how high was the climb, and how worthwhile the getting there. *Monk's Dreams* was the best thing I heard in 2018, and it hasn't been bettered.

Kimbrough is something different. But it stands alongside *Monk's Dreams* as permanent pillars to Frank's musical legacy. I miss Frank, and at the risk of committing a

sentimental fallacy I think *Kimbrough* makes clear that the musicians on the date do too. Sixty-seven musicians performing sixty-one tunes – shifting groups of musicians who had never played together before, performing tunes of Frank's that they'd not played before. The tunes are at once disciplined and open-ended; the musicians are respectful and creative. The result is a monument. Don't miss it.

Or any of the things on the list below. Fifty recordings. Every one pulled me in, sometimes to my surprise, always to my joy. * denotes a special favorite.

Greg Abate Magic Dance - The Songs of Kenny Barron
Alchemy Sound Project, Afrika Love,
Franco Ambrosetti Band, Lost Within You
Tim Berne - Broken Shadows
Dan Blake, Da Fe, "Fish in Puddles"
* Johnathan Blake - Homeward Bound
Lena Bloch & Feathery, Rose of Lifta
Borderlands Trio - Wandersphere
Anthony Braxton - Quartet (Standards) 2020
Patricia Brennan, Maquishti
Bill Charlap - Street of Dreams
Marc Copland, John
* East Axis - Cool With That
Orrin Evans - The Magic of Now
Floating Points Pharoah Sanders - Promises
* Kenny Garrett - Sounds from the Ancestors
Jon Gordon, Stranger Than Fiction
Maria Grand - Reciprocity
Noah Haidu, Slowly: For Keith Jarrett
Roy Hargrove and Mulgrew Miller - In Harmony
Dave Holland - Another Land
* Vijay Iyer - Uneasy
Marc Johnson - Overpass
Julian Lage - Squint
* James Brandon Lewis - Jesup Wagon
James Brandon Lewis, Code of Being
Charles Lloyd & the Marvels - Tone Poem
* Dave Douglas & Joe Lovano Sound Prints - Other Worlds
Joe Lovano Trio Tapestry - Garden of Expression
Pat Metheny - Side-Eye NYC
Charles Mingus - Mingus at Carnegie Hall
Yoko Miwa, Songs of Joy
Hafez Modirzadeh, Facets
Jason Moran, The Sound Will Tell You

Natural Information Society with Evan Parker - descension
Adam O'Farrill - Visions of Your Other

Rich Pellegrin, Solitude
Ivo Perelman, Brass and Ivory Tales
John Pizzarelli- Better Days Ahead (Solo Guitar Takes on Pat Metheny)
Chris Potter - Sunrise Reprise
* David Sanford - A Prayer from Lester Bowie
* Archie Shepp and Jason Moran - Let My People Go
Matthew Shipp, Codebreaker
Wadada Leo Smith, A Love Sonnet for Billie Holiday
Aki Takase, Auge
* Henry Threadgill Zooid - Poof
* Various Artists - Kimbrough
Anna Webber - Idiom
Miguel Zenon - The Law Years
Miguel Zenon and Luis Perdomo, El Arte del Bolero