

Sing Shuffle Along
Sissle & Blake (Harbinger)
Shuffle Along
Ehud Asherie (Blue Heron)
 by David R. Adler

Thanks to George C. Wolfe, Savion Glover and the team behind the current Broadway revival of *Shuffle Along* at the Music Box Theatre, there's renewed interest in black musical theater of the '20s, a fascinating era when jazz began to define the pop culture landscape. This all-black 1921 show, with music by pianist/songwriter Eubie Blake and vocalist/lyricist Noble Sissle, challenged the color line in important ways and showcased the likes of Florence Mills, Adelaide Hall, Josephine Baker and Paul Robeson. For reasons laid out by Richard Carlin and Ken Bloom in their 20-page liner essay for the astonishing *Sissle and Blake Sing Shuffle Along*, the show remains a cultural milestone. To hear 36-year-old pianist Ehud Asherie grapple with its legacy on his solo piano album *Shuffle Along* adds a welcome contemporary twist.

Sissle and Blake Sing Shuffle Along gathers material from several sources: '20s ensemble recordings; an uncredited piano roll; highlights from a well-preserved 1950 demo; and a couple of tracks of even more recent vintage. (The '70s? The sleeve info on this could be clearer.) Audio quality varies widely but within acceptable bounds; some is remarkably good. Sissle and Blake are amazingly magnetic even when they're tossing off renditions not meant for release.

In his banter between verses on "Bandana Days", Sissle evokes a competition between traditional and modern dance styles and plays around ingeniously with jazz' historical timeline. It's 1950, so he's able to refer to the modern dancers as "jitterbugs". And one aside is particularly pointed — Sissle announces, "Uncle Ned and his old-timers are doin' an old-fashioned cane dance!" A long pause, then: "Wonder what the beboppers are gonna say now."

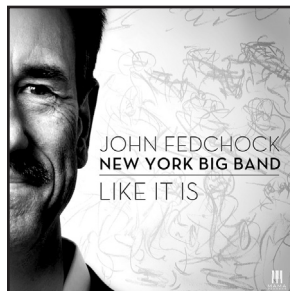
From a jazz standpoint the most gripping aspect of this archival release is Blake's pianism. The solo piano breaks in between vocals are a revelation. Content to play professional, elegant accompaniment most of the time, Blake seems to relish these breaks, leaping out like a rodeo bull from the gate, transitioning in an instant to the most intricate, bouncy and unmistakably authentic Harlem stride piano. The moment just as quickly passes and Blake falls back to a support role

(though even there, he can be flashy and genuinely surprising). "Baltimore Buzz", a solo piano instrumental, offers yet more evidence of Blake's superior skill and fire.

This is the bar that Blake and the stride masters have set for up-and-comers who find inspiration in this vital yet underappreciated music. Asherie covers just a subset of the *Shuffle Along* program, though he includes two songs, "Everything Reminds Me of You" and "Goodnight Angeline", which don't appear on the Sissle and Blake CD. His touch is confident, improvising fluid and astute, arrangements poised on the edge between stride and modern piano languages — sometimes very consciously as on "Bandana Days" and "If You've Never Been Vamped by a Brownskin".

Asherie's rubato ballads, including the landmark "Love Will Find a Way" (one of the first popular songs to depict romantic love between African-Americans), deftly blend a modern sensibility with a fluency in the sound of the time period. But his Bud Powell-esque romp on "I'm Just Wild About Harry" seems to answer Sissle's gently taunting remark above: this is what the beboppers are saying now.

For more information, visit harbingerrecords.com and blueheronrecords.com. A Eubie Blake tribute with Bill Charlap, Rossano Sportiello and Ted Rosenthal is at 92nd Street Y's Jazz in July Jul. 26th. See Calendar.



Like It Is
John Fedchock New York Big Band (MAMA)
 by Donald Elfman

Big band jazz thrives in the person of trombonist John Fedchock, who blends old and new for in-your-face excitement. *Like It Is* features some of the most talented players in New York for fresh takes on songbook standards and modern originals. This album is about the evolution of a working big band that honors the whole history of the genre.

Fedchock opens with the standard "You and The Night and The Music", recoloring its basic elements while keeping enough of the structure to allow expressive and intriguing solos from himself, Mark Vinci's soulful alto, Rich Perry's powerful tenor and knockout drumming by Dave Ratajczak, proving that a classic tune can still be vital. There are other standards here by Duke Ellington and Cedar Walton but a highlight is Fedchock's own tribute to Clifford Brown, "Ten Thirty 30", beautifully propulsive with dazzling piano from Allen Farnham against some impressive themes by the band and then, in homage to the dedicatee, blazing yet delicate bravura from trumpeter Scott Wendholt.

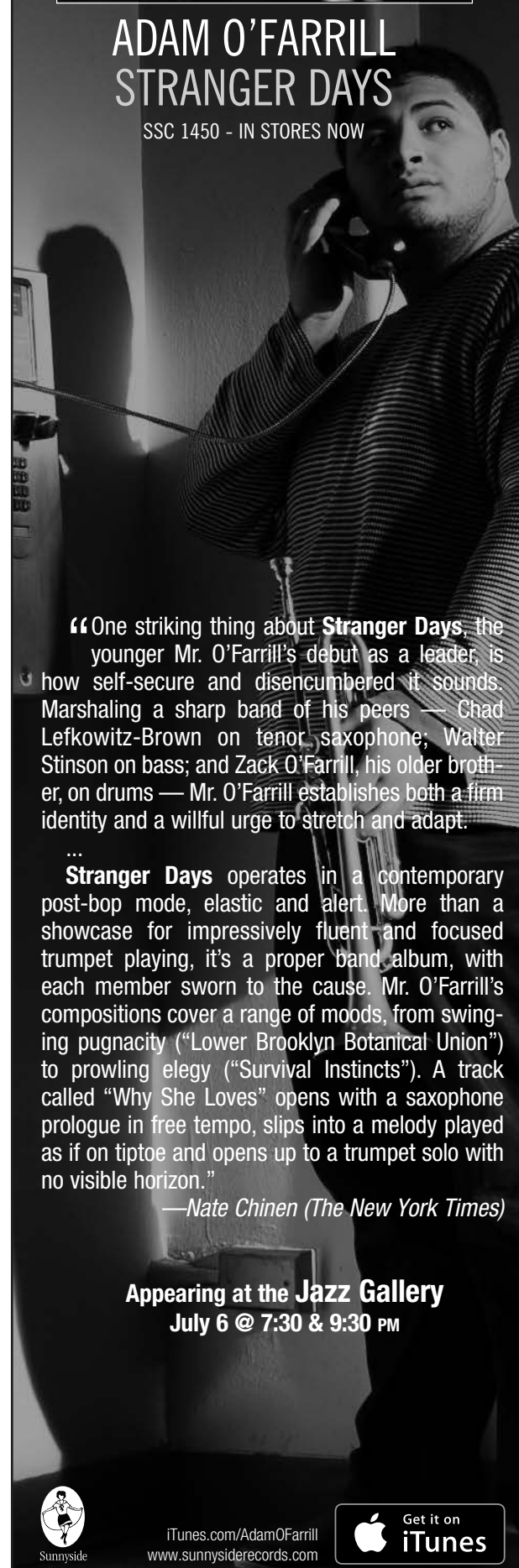
Fedchock's other originals are the danceable title tune, with in-the-groove solos from Charles Pillow (alto) and Barry Ries (trumpet); smart and swinging "Just Sayin'", which has knockout acappella brass playing, a sassy soprano solo (Pillow) and the leader's deft trombone fading into the distance at the close; appropriately named "Hair of the Dog", moving from cloudy to sunny thanks to Farnham and bassist Dick Sarpola to clearing solos by Fedchock and the wailing Walt Weiskopf (tenor); and sensuous "Havana", a lushly exotic tribute to the Cuban capital.

For more information, visit summitrecords.com/genre/mama-records-2. Fedchock is at Smalls Jul. 29th-30th. See Calendar.



ADAM O'FARRILL
STRANGER DAYS

SSC 1450 - IN STORES NOW



"One striking thing about *Stranger Days*, the younger Mr. O'Farrill's debut as a leader, is how self-secure and disencumbered it sounds. Marshaling a sharp band of his peers — Chad Lefkowitz-Brown on tenor saxophone; Walter Stinson on bass; and Zack O'Farrill, his older brother, on drums — Mr. O'Farrill establishes both a firm identity and a willful urge to stretch and adapt.

Stranger Days operates in a contemporary post-bop mode, elastic and alert. More than a showcase for impressively fluent and focused trumpet playing, it's a proper band album, with each member sworn to the cause. Mr. O'Farrill's compositions cover a range of moods, from swinging pugnacity ("Lower Brooklyn Botanical Union") to prowling elegy ("Survival Instincts"). A track called "Why She Loves" opens with a saxophone prologue in free tempo, slips into a melody played as if on tiptoe and opens up to a trumpet solo with no visible horizon."

—Nate Chinen (*The New York Times*)

Appearing at the Jazz Gallery
 July 6 @ 7:30 & 9:30 PM

Diane Moser's Composers Big Band
 w/guest composer and performer
Howard Johnson
 Celebrating 53 years in music and his 75th birthday!
 Wed., July 27 • 8-11 p.m.
 For more info: dianemosermusic.com

Photo: Rod Mickens

TRUMPETS JAZZ CLUB
 6 Depot Square Montclair, NJ 07042
 For reservations, call 973-744-2600
www.trumpetsjazz.com