

## Blindfold Test | BY DAN OUELLETTE

### Fred Hersch

In his first appearance at the Monterey Jazz Festival last September, pianist Fred Hersch played with his trio as well as sat down in front of a live audience in Dizzy's Den on a Saturday afternoon to be blindfolded.

#### Horace Silver

"Mexican Hip Dance" (*Horace Silver Retrospective*, Blue Note, 1999, rec'd 1966) Silver, piano; Tyrone Washington, tenor saxophone; Woody Shaw, trumpet; Larry Ridley, bass; Roger Humphrey, drums.

I can't identify who this is, but I have a few observations. It's the pianist's date because the pianist has more choruses than anyone else. The tune has the same changes as Coltrane's "Afro Blue," and it's recorded in a kind of head-in and head-out, Blue Note-styled date that probably took place in an afternoon. It sounds like everyone is playing in their own world. It didn't feel like the ensemble was going anywhere, and the pianist couldn't get anything going. His left hand was completely clunky, just stabbing dotted quarter notes while he was using his right hand to do something different. But when he tried to do some interesting things with his right hand, he'd break off. So the tune never took flight. The soloists were not very impressive. It was all jazzy jazz that was OK—nothing special. If it is a Blue Note side with those easy chord changes and style of arrangement, I'd guess it could have been Horace Silver. It was? I'm sorry I dissed Horace, but it just wasn't that good. It certainly wasn't like when he played with his A-band that had Joe Henderson or Freddie Hubbard. And I wish Horace could have put his left hand on his lap or done something different with it.

#### Jason Moran

"Blue Blocks" (*Ten*, Blue Note, 2010) Moran, piano; Tarus Mateen, bass; Nasheet Waits, drums.

I'm hearing a heavy gospelly feel. It's an interesting composition, but I don't think the pianist negotiated the tune particularly well. There are a lot of odd lengths of harmony. It's not 4/4 or 2/4. There are a lot of meters going on. And I don't think the rhythm section is quite sure about what to do. The bass player is all over the place, which can work, but it didn't for me. It ended with a bang and not a lot of finesse. I felt the tune was elusive, and I think it would be more effective to hear the head and a separate set of chord changes to play on and paraphrase the harmonies—and not have to jump through hoops of a bar of 4, a bar of 3 and such fast harmonic rhythm like three changes in a bar. I just don't think they pulled it off. It just got louder and didn't tell me a clear story. What I liked the most was that descending piano part that opened and closed the tune. It's Jason Moran? Wow! Jason is a close personal friend and colleague. He's going to be annoyed at me, but I still have to say that this piece didn't work for me. I have a great deal of respect for Jason as a pianist and composer, as well as a conceptualist. He's a big thinker. He's a very interesting artist, and sometimes these kinds of artists take chances and pull it off—but for me this track wasn't so successful.

#### Art Tatum

"Just One Of Those Things" (*The Best Of Art Tatum: The Complete Pablo Group Masterpieces*, Pablo, 1991, rec'd 1956) Tatum, piano; Red Callender, bass; Jo Jones, drums.

That's Cole Porter. The pianist is definitely a pre-bop player who is using his left hand. At first I thought Teddy Wilson, but he plays with a different energy and sound. So as a wild card, I'd say Art Tatum in a trio setting even though I've never heard him playing with a trio. You can hear the way he plays chords and the tendency to go to the full left hand. This tune is consistent with his sound, but all that I've heard of Tatum is his solo work. It is Tatum? Well, I think it works well, but I still appreciate him as a solo pianist. He's got unbelievable command. He never flubs.



#### Vijay Iyer

"Black & Tan Fantasy" (*Solo*, ACT Music & Vision, 2010) Iyer, piano

You're making this difficult for me. As a pianist, I'm very sensitive to how people orchestrate the piano. In the first section, it was thick and dramatic, then at the bridge it got really thin, then settled into a B-flat blues. The left hand is holding down the fort, while the right hand is playing "out." This piece might have benefited more by varying the left-hand pattern. And, after a while, the quality of the improvisation seemed to break down. Overall, this didn't strike me as particularly special. I'll make a guess: Marcus Roberts. No? It's Vijay Iyer? I see that now. But I enjoy his music most when he's playing with Rudresh Mahanthappa.

#### Andrew Hill

"Flight #19" (*Point Of Departure*, Blue Note, 1964) Hill, piano; Eric Dolphy, bass clarinet; Joe Henderson, tenor sax; Kenny Dorham, trumpet; Richard Davis, bass; Tony Williams, drums.

This is Andrew Hill from his old Blue Note days. It could be from *Point Of Departure* and has Eric Dolphy on bass clarinet. Andrew has a singular way of playing as well as assembling music. Ironically, the trio members that I'm playing with tomorrow night here—bassist John Hébert and drummer Eric McPherson—were Andrew Hill's last rhythm section. Andrew's music is so elusive and has a sense of mystery. I like that quality. It's very unpredictable. He was very much himself. He did his thing and let the chips fall.

#### Bill Evans

"Midnight Mood" (*Bill Evans Alone*, Verve, rec'd 1968)

This is Bill Evans. I know the tune. I've heard it before. Is it from Bill Evans Alone? I never met him, but I did hear him play a number of times in New York. As a solo player, he's so careful. It feels like a lot is worked out ahead of time. With his trio, he played loose. This sounds stiff, polished, but lovely. But there's not a whole lot of danger in there. I wished he would have pushed his solo playing further. I don't rank him up there with great solo piano players. I think he was good, but not awesome. I knew it was Bill from the first few bars with the voicing of his chords and the tune choice: a waltz. There's also a certain way that he played the lines with a buoyancy to his time feel that's unmistakable. **DB**

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