Florian Weber

Pianist Florian Weber is no stranger to the demands and endless rewards of trio playing. With his collaborative project Minsarah (Hebrew for "prism") he's created music of tremendous depth in the company of bassist Jeff Denson and drummer Ziv Ravitz. (Hear their eponymous 2006 debut, their 2014 follow-up *Blurring the Lines* and two creative summits with alto eminence Lee Konitz, *Deep Lee* and *Standards Live at the Village Vanguard*.)

On *Exploring the Music of Bill Evans and Monk*, however, Weber debuts another type of trio, this one with no bassist. Joining him in this homage to two of his major piano influences are two formidable musicians and leaders, Donny McCaslin on tenor saxophone and Dan Weiss on drums. The mastery of these players, and the sparseness of the format itself, allows Weber to delve deep into what he calls "polyphonic intuition," a key idea guiding him in the project.

"What always struck me about this instrumentation," Weber says, "is the speed with which elements like harmony or form can be changed as opposed to when you're playing with a bass. The Lovano-Frisell-Motian trio had a huge influence on me during college. The way they shaped the music without trying to replace a bassist, but rather embracing the possibilities of exploring new space, opened my ear and imagination. But there is also a tradition of this lineup, for instance Benny Goodman and his trio where Teddy Wilson had so much freedom to use all registers of the keyboard. It opens up even more possibilities for polyphonic intuition. It lets all 10 fingers decide on their own what they would like to do. By overloading the brain, the conscious mind shuts down and gives up on any possibility of control or trying to reach a defined goal."

One of our modern-day tenor titans, Donny McCaslin is celebrated for his work with Maria Schneider, Dave Douglas and many others; his albums on Douglas's Greenleaf label range from acoustic trio to bracingly fusion-esque, united by a bold compositional voice and virtuosic command of the horn. Weiss, a pivotal member of bands led by Rudresh Mahanthappa, David Binney, Matt Mitchell and more, has led his own trio and large-ensemble projects and also distinguished himself on Weber's 2012 quartet release

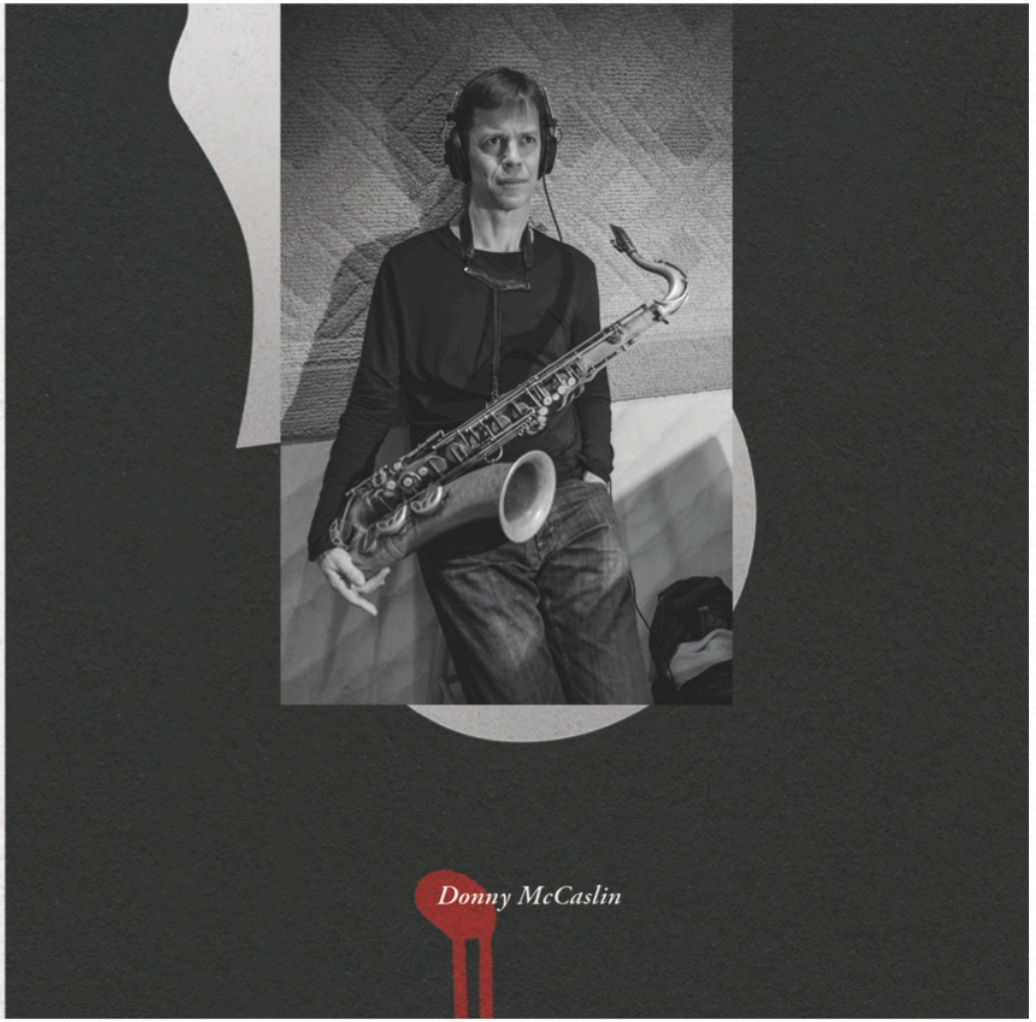
Biosphere, lending an equal measure of complexity, spaciousness and groove.

"'Stream of consciousness' comes to my mind thinking about Dan's playing and being," offers Weber. "I had this instrumentation in my head and Dan recommended we do a session with Donny. After just one session we decided to record. It felt like we had that instant connection. Both of them being deeply rooted in the tradition brought an openness and spontaneity that I felt was important for a fresh approach to this iconic music."

Evans and Monk might be seen as aesthetically worlds apart, but Weber ties them together. "Monk created these brilliant tunes, which I transcribed note for note in preparation for this record. So much feeling and logic in every note. And without Bill, jazz wouldn't be what it is today. I did several lectures at universities throughout Europe about how he is linked to the Tristano school and how he developed and extended those ideas. But that's not his only influence. He connected ideas that where present at one of the most fertile moments in jazz history and brought them together in a unique style and language of his own."

Another key motivator for *Evans and Monk*, along with the "polyphonic intuition," was the notion of "duality". "I am playing two instruments [piano and Rhodes]," Weber observes. "It's mainly about two composers, two atmospheres. It connects to my life on many levels. I live on two continents and feel connected to two cultures side. Also, living the life of a musician between stage and home. Duality is there to embrace all the shades between the poles, to create circulation of ideas between them."

Like McCaslin and Weiss in their own careers, Weber has pursued a path of rhythmic intensity and sonic forward-thinking: his overlap of acoustic and electric piano with Lionel Loueke's guitar on *Biosphere* was striking, and right away on *Evans and Monk* the combined Rhodes/piano texture returns with the opening solo piece "Since We Met" (from Evans' *Eloquence*, a set of duos with bassist Eddie Gomez). That acoustic/electric blend becomes a theme of sorts on the album. "I always play Rhodes and piano at the same time,"



Donny McCaslin

Dan Weiss

Weber muses. "I like how they mix and not-mix in various registers. By concentrating on one ins-insnstrument but playing both, I have to leave the playing of one of the instruments entirely to my subconscious."

In Weber's hands, Evans' dissonant swinger "Twelve-Tone Tune Two" becomes almost reminiscent of the Brecker Brothers. Its aggressive, oblique funkiness isn't far off from the trio's arrangements of Monk's "Criss Cross", "Four In One" and "Evidence." "TTTT" is "written in 23/16," Weber reveals, "where two rhythmic layers are present the whole time, each one following its own logic and counterpointing the other. The same duality happens on 'Criss Cross', with a 3/4 and 4/4 layer in the A section, and a 4/4 and 5/4 layer in the B section."

Of the more contemplative pieces, Monk's "Ruby, My Dear" and "'Round Midnight" share a certain spirit with Evans' "Time Remembered" and "Spring Is Here" (the latter by Rodgers & Hart, famously rendered by Evans on *Portrait In Jazz*). One feature in common is that they're all duos: "Ruby, My Dear" and "'Round Midnight" is for piano and drums, "Time Remembered" for Rhodes and tenor, "Spring Is Here" for piano and tenor. "The ballads I thought of as intimate two-people conversations," Weber explains.

Much like *Biosphere* with its unexpected covers of Coldplay, Jamiroquai and Eric Clapton, Evans and Monk includes a bracing treatment of "Judas" by pop sensation Lady Gaga (Stefani Germanotta). With Gaga there's arguably a bona fide Bill Evans connection: in very different times and circumstances, both Gaga and Evans had the opportunity to record with Tony Bennett. But this was not part of Weber's thinking. "The tune is a metaphor for giving everything a chance, you can find beauty. Don't judge too early, dig deeper into things. What drew my attention wasn't so much the melody or the seemingly simple rhythm. It was everything else but that. So my arrangement has to do with what happens in the background. The so-called accompaniment drew me to a lot of the inherent rhythmic ideas and lines that I tried to single out."

In its brisk, polyrhythmic density, its uncluttered openness, its stark timbral nuances that inspire soloing on the most adventurous level, *Exploring the Music of Bill Evans and Monk* is the best sort of gesture toward two greats of the jazz canon. The material is everyone's to explore and reinvent. But Weber, McCaslin and Weiss find a vibrant connection that only they can, one that expands the music's possibilities.

David R. Adler
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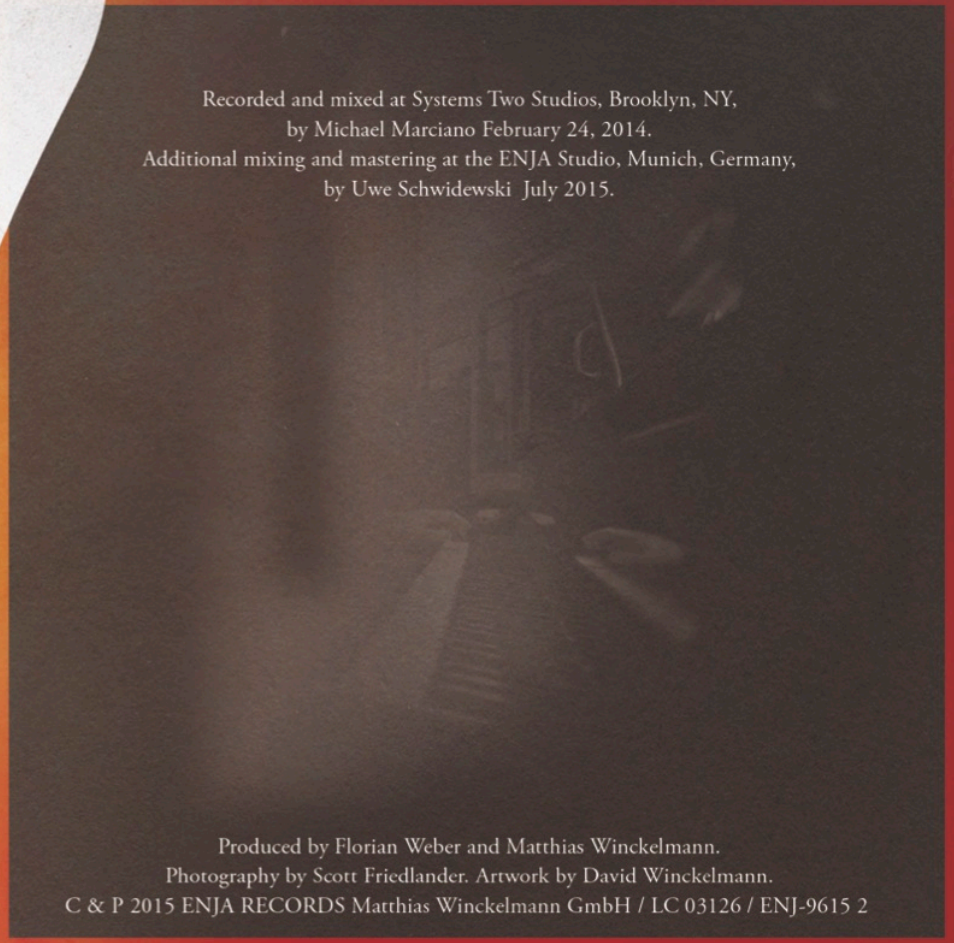

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