

Discussions -- Jay Dunner

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QUOTE OF THE MONTH: "What we do accumulates; the future is the result of what we do right now." (Pema Chodron, American philosopher)

MISSY HIGGINS OZ (Eleven)

One of Australia's best-kept secrets in the pop singer-songwriter stables, Higgins is now on her fourth horse, trying to leap the hurdles to international recognition. Don't know her? Think Sara-Bareilles-meets-Carly-Simon. Higgins' third release, 2016's *The Ol' Razzle Dazzle*, featured the peppy earworm "Hello Hello" which was showcased on *The Jay Leno Show*, but which inexplicably failed to bring Higgins' catalog up from the Land Down Under. Perhaps *Oz* will be her yellow brick road. If so, it's at the expense of her own savvy songwriting, since *Oz* is a covers album, the title of which is a reference to the original songwriters' Australian heritage. An equivalent release might be Carly Simon or Janis Ian covering songs by Shawn Colvin, Bonnie Raitt, and Mary Chapin Carpenter. That said, Higgins' song choices sound almost self-penned. The layered harmonies of Dan Sultan's "Old Fitzroy," the *Clockwork Orange* imagery of Perry Keyes' "NYE," and the melancholy mood of D. McComb, A. Kakulas, and G. Lee's "Curse on You" are all Higgins trademarks – smart songwriting with even smarter arrangements. Had Higgins not confessed the Oz-centric authorships in the liner notes, most listeners would be none the wiser, simply accepting *Oz* as another installment of her singer-songwriter wizardry. ****

DAVID BOWIE BLACKSTAR (Columbia)

Throughout his music career, David Bowie was nothing if not a chameleon. Never one to rest on his laurels, he bounded through Broadway pop, theatrical rock, glam, glam-punk, nostalgia, electronica, disco R&B, industrial, jungle, always keeping his fans guessing his next move. Even amidst speculation of whatever Bowie was assembling in the studio in 2016, little did anyone guess that *Blackstar* would also be his swan song, as Bowie succumbed to liver cancer two days after the album's release. In retrospect, it would seem that his deteriorating health may have driven the somewhat unfinished feel to the album. The songs are less structured and less disciplined, as if Bowie knew he was racing against time. For example, what possessed Bowie to load "Girl Loves Me" with the very indecorous "where the **** did Monday go?" lyric that repeats ad nauseam? Was this lazy filler, a placeholder of sorts? Or was Bowie ranting against his own draining hourglass? Why do more of the lyrics lean toward the abstract, even free verse? Perhaps Bowie was trying to mirror the music, which itself is laced with improvisation. The overall mood is a shadowy, almost mystical one. Some tracks drone on into a numbing repetitiveness ("Blackstar," "Lazarus"), but most remain engaging. However, the final two tracks provide summation. "Dollar Days," with its "I'm dying to . . ." fatalistic theme, goes nearly full-circle in Bowie's career, recalling his under-appreciated, decidedly dark classic, *The Man Who Sold the World*. And closing the album (and Bowie's career) is "I Can't Give Everything Away," *Blackstar*'s "A Day in the Life," a haunting, portentous farewell, suggesting that we look him up on the other side, where the Thin White Duke may greet us with yet another soundtrack for our own ziggy stardusts. ***1/2

CHRIS DINGMAN THE SUBLIMINAL AND THE SUBLIME (Inner Arts Initiative, Inc.)

Dingman's music falls into the ECM school of jazz / not jazz improvisation. The CD's opener, "Tectonic Plates," starts very quietly, with subtle swells of vibraphone whose initial mallet strikes are masked behind a slowly-pressed volume pedal. "Voices of the Ancient" follows, a seventeen-minute sandwich of pretty, but stuttering, full-band thematic statements wrapping a core of quiet guitar-and-vibes noodling. A short, piano-and-sax "Plea" then climbs to "The Pinnacles," another long suite repeating the structure of "Tectonic Plates" – six minutes of very quiet vibes-with-delay / piano figures trailed by fourteen minutes of jazz improv around subtly progressive constructs. The disc closes with "All Flows Forth," a long waltz that erupts at end with some free-form blowing, only to collapse into raindrop vibes under a mournful pianissimo piano. Throughout the album, there is more texture than melody -- not necessarily a bad thing, considering that the melodies are often just simplistic unison lines of vibes, piano, and sax. A little more harmonic structure, as well as assertiveness by Dingman himself, would have been welcome in this band-dominated set. Whose line is it, anyway? ***

***** Outstanding. **** Excellent. *** Good. ** Fair. * Ecch!

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