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MUSIC
BLOG

Take five: John Fordham's month in jazz – April

In this first of a series of monthly columns, John Fordham picks out his musical milestones from the past few weeks. Tell us in the comments section below if there's things we've missed, plus what you'd like to see John covering in next month's column

1) An anniversary: Sonny Rollins' *The Bridge*

This month marks 50 years since the release of [Sonny Rollins'](#) 1962 album *The Bridge*, a milestone event that heralded the young New York saxophone master's comeback after a self-imposed three-year sabbatical.

By departing the [jazz](#) scene so soon after fans and critics had fallen at his feet following breakout albums such as *Saxophone Colossus* (1956) and *Way Out West* (1957), [Rollins](#) – who was retreating to study, practice and deepen his art – was, with this album, previewing the wilful independence and creative perfectionism that would eventually make him the most famous surviving jazz saxophonist on the planet. The maestro's tireless ingenuity was recently endorsed by the organisers of the [2012 London Jazz Festival](#), who last month announced that the 81-year-old will headline the 10-day festival with a gig at the Barbican on 16 November.

Some have speculated that Rollins was intimidated by an eruption of new creativity around him in 1959 (from [Miles Davis](#), [Ornette Coleman](#), Charles Mingus, or his own tenor-sax heir [John Coltrane](#), for starters). But the man himself has simply pointed out he'd been hailed as the new [Charlie Parker](#) too early, and all the acclaim risked hardening his style into a signature sound before he'd properly explored alternatives. That was the impulse that brought the three years of privacy and practice, culminating in the making of *The Bridge* – so named because Rollins had wanted space to stretch his big sound and bigger imagination, and had taken to practising in the open, on the Lower East Side's [Williamsburg Bridge](#).

2) A rising star: Tineke Postma

Fast forward to 2002. On the other side of the city, at the Manhattan School of Music, a Dutch sax student called [Tineke Postma](#) was on an exchange programme from the conservatory of Amsterdam. Postma, who played a typically characterful show with her own quartet at London's Pizza Express Jazz Club [earlier this month](#), doesn't mimic Sonny Rollins or anyone else. At 33, she's a mature player with her own sound. But the American jazz baton has been passed to her by teachers intimately linked to Rollins and

his postwar New York circle. Her American teachers included Dave Liebman and Chris Potter, two contemporary jazz stars steeped in the sax legacy Rollins inherited from Coleman Hawkins and [Charlie Parker](#), and which he would in turn hand on to Coltrane.

Moreover, Liebman, Potter and Postma herself (in common with contemporary jazz players all over the globe), are also highly original interpreters of the unique themes of the late [Thelonious Monk](#), who was a childhood friend of Rollins in the 40s and a big influence on his musical thinking. As a formally educated, musically eclectic 21st-century woman carving a career in what, for decades, was almost exclusively a man's world, Postma certainly inhabits a very different jazz landscape to that of Rollins' youth – but their roots are entwined just the same.

Here's Postma demonstrating those connections with the help of an even bigger female jazz star, 2011 Grammy winner Esperanza Spalding, [who comes to the UK with her own band in May](#). The clip is from Postma's Pablo Neruda adaptation *Leave Me A Place Underground*, featured on last year's *The Dawn of Light*.

3) From across the pond: the New York Standards Quartet

This month has also seen a big, UK-wide tour by a contemporary band whose own New York connections are evident: its core membership is based there, and it even names itself after the place. The [New York Standards Quartet](#), a subtly unorthodox group that includes Gene Jackson, a former Herbie Hancock sideman, in its drum chair, was invited to the UK by London-resident US bass player Mike Janisch. On the face of it, the NYSQ does what jazz musicians have been doing since the 1930s: takes Broadway show tunes and pop songs and improvises on their harmonies. But they take the process a few deconstructionist steps further, and sometimes hide famous tunes so deviously the penny only drops when they get to the end. For all their tune bending, the NYSQ are far from jazz revolutionaries. But saxophonist Tim Armacost and superb pianist David Berkman exhibit a thoughtful lyricism, and it grows on you; in live performance, it sometimes emits an unexpectedly intense heat.

Here's the lineup (with original bassist Yosuke Inoue rather than Mike Janisch) on *All The Things You Are*, a classic they explored with a similar Latin twist on the recent tour.

4) Reinventing the classics the Corea/Burton way

The glitteringly skilful duo comprising pianist Chick Corea and vibraphonist Gary Burton have been working together for 40 years. They also did their own kind of standards-bending and classic-pop manipulation this month, in particular by including the Beatles' *Eleanor Rigby* in a programme that, on their new album *Hot House*, sits alongside evergreens by Dave Brubeck, Jobim, and Kurt Weill, among others. Burton and Corea know so many ways around their respective instruments and each other's quirks that hearing them together can feel like eavesdropping on a private conversation, [as John Lewis observed](#) of their April London concert. But it can still be a fascinating process to witness.

5) In memory: Tony Marsh, and other jazz greats

One of Gary Burton's pioneering predecessors on the vibraphone was Teddy Charles, an innovative musician who worked with Davis, Parker and Mingus before swapping the choppy waters of jazz for a life as a charter-boat skipper in the Caribbean. On 16 April, Charles [died in New York aged 84](#). The British jazz world suffered its own sad losses: the

deaths of pianist and influential educator Pete Saberton, aged 61, and, on Easter Monday, the imaginatively provocative percussionist Tony Marsh, who was 72. Marsh could anticipate what improvisers were going to do next with an accuracy bordering on the telepathic, and was a selflessly attentive ensemble player in no-holds-barred improv bands (most notably free-sax giant Evan Parker), theme-playing orthodox groups, and outfits leaning toward contemporary classical music.

Tributes to Marsh are steadily finding their way on to the web, but here's a graceful example of his artistry, from the Cafe Oto in October 2010, on a tribute to the memory of an earlier British jazz legend, trumpeter Harry Beckett. Marsh and other former Beckett sidemen Chris Biscoe (sax), Alastair Gavin (piano) and Fred Thelonious Baker (bass) are joined on a couple of typical Beckett originals by trumpeter Henry Lowther, gracefully taking the absent composer's parts.

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BuddhaPest

26 April 2012 5:23PM

Personal April highlight: David Sanchez at the Pizza Express jazz club on Tuesday night - superb!

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billboll

26 April 2012 7:26PM

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Drust
26 April 2012 10:02PM

There is a good review of the gig by Mike Hobart in the FT: just to lend my support to your column. Many thanks for bringing this fine selection to our attention. I was especially impressed by Tineke Postma's leading the motive style in her own, superb - and the syncopated low register piano motif with the bass reminded me a bit of EST. Who was the vocalist? Loved that voice!

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jeznelson
26 April 2012 10:27PM

One of Tony Marsh's last gigs was playing in a trio with the Art Ensemble saxophonist Roscoe Mitchell at Cafe Otto. You can hear an extract on this week's Jazz On 3 - on I-Player until Monday ... <http://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/console/b01ghc6p>

Great to have this new blog John - too early to suggest you make it weekly ?!

jez

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7barrels
27 April 2012 7:56AM

sounds like Esperanza on vocals on the Tineke track.

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7barrels
27 April 2012 8:01AM

of course it is, just re read the article, duhh!
Another vote for this being fortnightly.

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TheLowEnd
27 April 2012 10:53AM

Great to see another regular blog from John, looking forward to making this part of my monthly reading schedule. As to next month, I have Vijay Iyer and Marcus Miller on the gig radar. Can't recommend Iyer's last record enough..

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RKScarr
27 April 2012 1:51PM

Pat Martino delivered a stunning set at Ronnie Scott's earlier this week, including a gorgeous arrangement of 'Blue in Green' which had the audience enraptured.

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nilpferd
27 April 2012 8:21PM

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Looking forward to the series too, it's a good idea to include
"anniversary recordings" (though a pity we'll missed the 50yr.
anniversaries of 1958-61). Herbie Hancock's *Takin' Off* next
month, perhaps?

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Just listening to "The Bridge", it strikes me that Rollins' sound
on this "reminds" me a lot of Joe Henderson. Possibly it's just
that the line-up is echoed much later in the Henderson/Scofield
/Holland/Foster Miles Davis tribute album, *So near, so far*.

I'll second @TheLowEnd's opinion about the Vijay Iyer album
being a recent highlight. There's something of the same
inventiveness as well as an innovative approach to standards on
an older album I've just recently encountered; Jan Johansson's
1961-62 albums *8 bitar/Innertrio*.