

# SLIM & HIM

Slim and Michael Coyle talk about recordings.

## LONDON

**Him:** Let's start by noting that we're writing this column after a five-month stay in London.

**Slim:** Where by day we worked. But at night we played by going to as many Jazz shows as we could squeeze in. We had a lot to choose from.

**Him:** I know, and the funny thing is that so many of the musicians we talked to wished that they could move to New York where, they imagined, there was so much more work.

**Slim:** [laughs] And if you go to New York you hear about how healthy the European scene is. As a fan, it seems the same only different. Perhaps a case of the grass is always greener on the other side of the pond?...

**Him:** The Jazz scene in London is small, at least by comparison with the possibilities available to pop musicians, but the fan base is loyal and even passionate. And there are advantages to the scene being smallish. It seems like most everyone knows everyone else: we saw a kind of cooperation among musicians, musicians going out to support one another's shows, and even sharing gigs.

**Slim:** And there is an organized system in place with detailed listings of performances. There is no shortage of free (no cost) published Jazz guides available: *Jazz in London*; *Jazz UK*; and *Jazz Guide*—which is chock full of just Trad performances. It's interesting that the Trad Jazz guide consistently is as fat as the other two guides combined. Even though we didn't go to any such shows, British Trad is clearly healthy and still attracting fans. Humphrey Littleton lives on.

**Him:** Right, then. Let's focus on the clubs we regularly attended and do some comparisons for context with some New York clubs.

**Slim:** We mostly ricocheted between the avant-garde and straight-ahead vocals.

**Him:** Let's start talking about Ronnie Scott's, just because it's been London's most famous Jazz venue for half-a-century now (having just celebrated its golden jubilee). Ronnie's is the usual destination for visiting American mainstream dignitaries—we saw Pharoah Sanders there (and he was *hot*—hotter than I've heard him in years), Kenny Barron, vocalists Marlana Shaw and Dee Dee Bridgewater, as well as bluesman Little Axe (Skip McDonald). It also presents Britain's best however—including the likes of vocalists Claire Martin, Ian Shaw, Georgie Fame, and Gill Manly.

**Slim:** Ronnie Scott's, in Soho, is a fairly large club, seating around 250 people with additional room for standing. Except that it's bigger, it could be compared to the Village Vanguard in terms of the type of

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Buddy Greco and Gill Manly by Slim

“acts” that come through. The hundreds of photos on the walls (many taken by David Sinclair, a UK version of Herman Leonard if you will) provide additional entertainment serving as who’s who in the Jazz world.

Ronnie Scott’s also puts together shows that connect UK’s finest to the established canon. For instance pianist James Pearson “remembers George Shearing,” Sarah Weller takes it “[Doris] Day by Day” and Gill Manly performs the Nina Simone songbook a couple

times a year. This isn’t to say the music isn’t good because the thing I noticed about R.S.’ is it’s a club experience as opposed to, say, a show at Lincoln Center (The Barbican is analogous to Jazz at Lincoln Center). At least with the shows we saw (mentioned above), the music feels spontaneous and not polished to dullness.

Speaking of **Gill Manly**, it was a thrill to see that she is performing again. Back in 1994 Parrot Records released her fantastic debut, *Detour Ahead*, which couldn’t have been more aptly titled because promptly afterwards she retired for a 15 year spell. Lucky for us Linn Records recently released her Ella tribute, *With a Song in My Heart*. This record established her Jazz chops but, for my money, she thrills on taking ‘70s Pop hits and, with her finesse and added Jazz influence, really sings the pants off of them. Tunes associated with Minnie Ripperton, Bill Withers, Neil Sedaka, Michael Franks, and Luther Vandross.

**Him:** We’ve mentioned Gill Manly, the small but supportive nature of the London scene, and Ronnie Scott’s. One night at R.S.’ offered an example of how this all works. We were there to hear Dee Dee Bridgewater, found ourselves seated near Gill Manly and started talking with her when we were overheard by **Frank Griffith**—an American reed man and band leader who has been making his home in London since 1996. He handed us a copy of his new CD—**Holland Park Non-Stop** (Hep 2095). It features Tina May on three tracks, “Oh You Crazy Moon,” “That’s All,” and “Trav’lin’ Light.” This band really is *Big*: with Griffith (cl, ts) it includes 18 members.

**Slim:** It’s horn-heavy and classic, more in the camp of Thad Jones

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Dewey Redman by Mark Ladenson

and Mel Lewis than the Mingus Big Band or contemporary outfits like Either/Orchestra. In addition to the tracks with May, and four originals by Griffith, standards include “Strollin’” (Horace Silver), “Baby Won’t You Please Come Home,” “Shine,” “Body and Soul,” and “These Foolish Things.”

**Him:** I like Griffith’s clarinet work, how he works the warm lower registers, and I wonder if that orientation is what drew him to the unlikely inclusion of “(That’s Why They Call Me) Shine,” whose 1910 lyrics (by Cecil Mack and Lew Brown) supposedly represent a Black man’s complaint about racism that is today cringe-worthy, sort of like “What Did I Do To Be So Black and Blue?” (“I’m white inside,” etc.). It’s a great tune that lends itself to a swinging treatment, and Griffith’s arrangement brings out the best in it. Thoughtful, polished and professional, this record should please 21st Century lovers of big band music—and in London at least there seems to be lots of them.

**Slim:** Speaking of big bands, we caught the Brotzmann 10tet at Café Oto, a club (as far as the music is concerned) that could be compared to either The Stone or Roulette. They also feature electronic experimental music and Avant Rock. Another great place to hear music off the beaten path is the Vortex. I can’t think of an exact American parallel to this club because, while a home to avant-garde music since 1987 (Evan Parker is a mainstay—we saw an excellent show he did with Stan and Clarke Tracey as well as Hans Koller), we’ve also seen more mainstream shows, like the highly entertaining Ian Shaw—his show includes everything from cabaret to one-man stand-up. More on Shaw’s latest release later. First let’s discuss this recent release: **Lio Leo Leon by London Improvisers Orchestra** (PSI 11.04), a group that would be at home in either of these clubs.

**Him:** The London Improvisers Orchestra is unusual in that all numbers are group improvisations. What makes improvisation for a group this size possible is *conduction*—which differs from the work of the conductor of a classical orchestra in that the conductor isn’t leading the orchestra through compositions or even arrangements. *Conduction* as conceived here isn’t simply about leaving room for individual performers; it suggests as well that the conductor will respond to what s/he’s hearing, that his or her vision develops in real time. There is nothing easy about this music. It’s exacting on performers and listeners alike. And it tends to be noisy. There’s no swing here, and no melody in its usual sense, although melodic elements abound. The album opens with an unconduted improvisation, moves into “Wiretapping” (conducted

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Wadada Leo Smith  
by Russell Arthur Roberts

by Alison Blunt) and then, after 12:36, develops into another group improvisation. Track four is conducted by Steve Beresford. Track five, “Numbers Listening,” is conducted by Caroline Kraabel; after 5:48 it moves into another group improvisation called “After Numbers,” the “place” the orchestra finds itself after the conduction. The closing number is perhaps the most organized on the album, for the reason made evident in its title: “Concerto for Ishmael Wadada Leo Smith & Orchestra.” The piece begins ominously, heavily, with Wadada’s horn calling elephantine-like above the rumble. Rumble turns briefly into gorgeous harmonies just under four minutes in, and then new energies disrupt the temporary balance. So it goes, the music finding balances almost as quickly as it overturns them. As I said, there’s nothing easy *about* this music, but I find it fascinating.

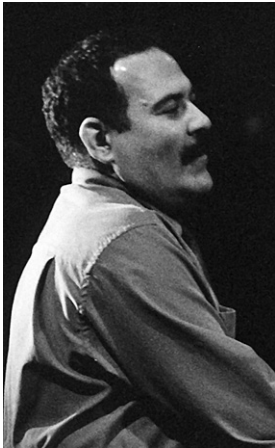
**Slim:** It’s harder and harder to be fascinated with so much out there, but I found pianist/vocalist/composer Benet McLean refreshing—not in an avant-garde way but in a retro kind of way, taking musics from the past and applying them to the modern day.

**Him:** Well, sure. Fifty to sixty years ago serious listeners were looking to contemporaneous avant-gardes to bring new life to the music. In 2011 we’ve had half a century of musicians deconstructing every convention and rule they could find, and doing so for ever smaller audiences. I’m not one to put any weight on the term “postmodern,” but it does seem to me that someone like Benet is most original when boldly combining and recombining elements from earlier eras and various genres, both in and out of jazz tradition. The sound of surprise is now meeting once familiar elements where you least expect them.

**Slim:** Yes, Monk is a landmark that Modernists reference, and certainly McLean references Monk but even more so Tatum, all the while weaving in a distinct hip-hop/funk vibe. If Benet were a New York borough he’d be Brooklyn. He has technique in abundance but his emphasis is on street smarts more than virtuosity. Less a woodshed than an urban cellar but certainly not a classroom. He’s refreshing and not smug in a “let me wow you with this trick.”

**Him:** And yet it’s his chops that give his street smarts character and make them interesting. He does draw on hip-hop rhythms, but not much at all like Courtney Pine and others were doing 15 years ago—and he’s less interested in turntables and samples than in the low-end theory of old-school artists like Tribe Called Quest. Let me go out on a limb and say that of all the terrific artists we heard in London, **Benet McLean** is the one I’m most eager to see again. Let’s discuss the brilliant sequence from his most recent (2008) release **In the Land of Oo-Bla-Dee**: “What You Wanna Hear

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Hilton Ruiz by Ken Weiss

(Part 1)" / "Giant Steps" / "What You Wanna Hear (Part 2)" (BCLN #2). How did Art Tatum come to play "Giant Steps," and how did hip-hop, coming down on the one, learn to swing so hard? Art Tatum, or maybe even Jaki Byard.

**Slim:** This sequence demonstrates his encyclopedic command of Stride, Be-bop, Funk and forward. After seeing/hearing him live, twice, I don't think his CDs do him justice. Which is certainly not to imply they're bad because they are fine but they're just not as tight as his live performances.

**Him:** I wouldn't even say "tight." I'd say "explosive" or "passionate."

**Slim:** You're right: And maybe the danger in polishing the CDs more is that the polish would kill that certain charm we see so rarely these days. I've certainly gone back to these CDs plenty of times. The music is ambitious, intelligent, funky, and thoughtful, and even if the records are imperfect they should be heard. His 2004 debut recording is **Clichés For Another Day** (BCLN #1).

**Him:** OK, then. And let's note that we heard him in two very different venues. The first time was in The Hideaway, in south London's Streatham, and the second time was at the celebrated Pizza Express on Dean St., in Soho, which despite the unlikely and even generic name is in many ways the second most visible club in central London. We saw **Ian Shaw** there, for instance, at his release party for **The Abbey Road Sessions** (Splash Point 12).

**Slim:** Like Benet McLean, Ian Shaw has an abundance of talent and draws from many different sources—Cabaret, Jazz, Rock-era Pop stand-up comedy—but remains stylistically focused and even distinct. To clarify, look at the song-list here: Cole Porter, Michael Jackson, Stealer's Wheel, Dori Caymmi, Joni Mitchell, Hoagy Carmichael and other poets of Tin Pan Alley and a Blues number. The treatments are all Shaw.

**Him:** On "Stairway to the Stars" it's just Shaw and bassist Peter Ind—another fixture on the London scene worthy of mention.

**Slim:** Yes, in his 80+ years, in addition to his marvelous bass-playing, he's run a few Jazz clubs himself, has authored some books, is an artist, and still runs the Jazz labels Bass Clef and Wave. (Other personnel include guitarist David Preston on guitar, pianist Phil Ware, drummer Gene Caldarazzo, and alto sax-player Zhenya Strigalev.) We saw Peter play one night in Chelsea's 606 Club; another fine venue.

**Him:** Where we also saw pianist **Janette Mason**, where she was comping for a number of singers. Let's discuss her 2008 album, **Alien Left Hand** (Fireball no #). This record might be my favorite

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mainstream acquisition of our London sojourn. Parts of this record are just terrific. Her playing is confident, bold even, saturated in Jazz tradition, and her left and right hands often seem to have their own brains. Moreover, she's an impressive writer, able to compose intelligent music that usually is still memorable as *song*. She shows real chops as an arranger, too: I love her cover of the Eurhythmics' "Sweet Dreams." Annie Lennox's melody line is mostly carried by the bass, and there's something almost Monkish about the jaggedness of Mason's right hand.

**Slim:** She's good at creating a mood, whether somber ("Mae's Song"), funkified ("Dominatrix"), or generic mainstream ("New York Cab Ride"). The other standard, Bernstein's "Some Other Time," which Mason takes solo, offers the best opportunity to take Mason's measure against the current scene. We should note that, although listed among the personnel for the entire album, vocalist Lea DeLaria actually features only on "NY Cab Ride"—and even here adds vocalese rather than her typical scat or straight-ahead singing.

**Him:** DeLaria is a transplanted American: let's turn to some of the CDs in this stack by British vocalists based in London.

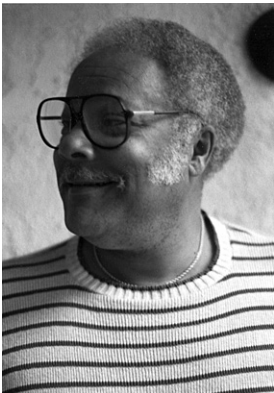
**Slim:** Fine. **Tina May's** recently released (recorded in 2005) **A Wing and a Prayer** (33 Jazz 134). This is the type of Tina May record I most enjoy—when she takes on contemporary music as opposed to songbook or more traditional fare. She covers Joe Henderson ("Black Narcissus"), Kenny Barron ("Sunshower"), Kenny Wheeler (the title track), Bill Evans ("Turn Out the Stars") as well as Bacharach ("House Is Not a Home"). There are some songbook numbers—a couple of Cole Porter tunes (You'd Be So Nice To Come Home To" and "Easy To Love"), and Lerner and Lane's "Too Late Now". (Personnel: Stan Sultzman, sax/flute ; Nikki Iles, p).

**Him:** I've always liked her middle range, but her upper-register sometimes strikes me as a little thin.

**Slim:** I agree. Her middle range is warm, even creamy. This album reminds me of my favorite of her recordings (now sadly out of print), **Time Will Tell**. Less safe and more experimental than much of her work in between these two dates. Also of possible interest is the just released **Tina May Sings Piaf: Celebrating a Legend** (33 Records 221), an album sung mostly in French but still in the Jazz idiom. Personnel: Nikki Iles (p), Karen Street (accordion), Julie Walkington (b).

**Him:** I notice we have another release coming from the same label, this one a duo record with **Louise Gibbs** and pianist **Kirk Lightsey**—**Every Body's Song But Our Own** (33 Records 172).

**Slim:** That she's ambitious can be seen in the very range of her



Jerome Richardson by Susan Rusch

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Steve Swell by Ken Weiss



John Menegon by Mark Ladenson

material: from Michel Legrand to Mingus, from Kenny Wheeler to Monk to Rodgers and Hart. She can sing but I find this all a bit too mannered. A little looseness would go a long way here. Maybe my expectations are too high as a result of her having made one of my favorite recordings of “The Thrill Is Gone” (**Invitation**: 33 Records 40). The success on that album probably has much to do with Lynne Arriale’s chordal piano playing, but the arrangement of “Thrill” in particular is unlike the standard treatment of this number. Not that Lightsey’s efforts are shabby. I enjoyed his contribution more than the vocals. For me Gibbs’ singing is very proper. Those who appreciate a great selection *well sung*, look no further.

**Him**: You know, there are still lots of people we haven’t yet touched on, but we can hope what we’ve offered so far will give our readers a sense of how much is going on in London, and maybe amuse our English readers with how the scene struck two ardent Americans.

How about if we go out with 20 words or less a few more records? Let me start with Liane Carroll. She’s got a big, soulful voice—one that could fill most venues without a mic—and her piano playing is bluesy and inventive. And her version of Hoagy’s “Memphis in June” (**Slow Down**; Splash Point 4) has become for me definitive.

**Slim**: **Claire Martin** probably needs no introduction, but if I had to pick one record out of her dozen released I’d choose **The Waiting Game** (Linn), and the one track would be “The People That You Never Get To Love.”

**Him**: **Georgia Mancio**, a singer we saw perform with Ian Shaw, has a vibrato-less voice like those Brazilian bossa-nova singers.

**Trapeze** (Roomspin 46) is the record I’d recommend, with special attention to the closing track, a cover of David Bowie’s “Life on Mars,” with much of the song delivered in Portuguese.

**Slim**: And finally—**Polly Gibbons**—but with a slight disclaimer as most of what’s available (and there isn’t much) is forgettable Pop. But her Jazz venture, **Moanin’**, (MOJO) is exceptionally strong. We had a bit of trouble tracking down this CD. She’s young and probably has a number of industry people whispering in her ear, steering her toward Joss Stone territory. But hopefully she’ll use her talent for good and not for evil.