

Violin Breakdown

A frequent sideman for the likes of Béla Fleck and Steve Earle, violinist Casey Driessen has monster chops and an imagination to match. His second recording, *Oog* (Red Shoe 209; 56:15) ★★★★★ twists bluegrass conventions into pretzels, remaking "Conversation With Death" as an amped-up fever dream and feeding Bill Monroe's "Ashland Breakdown" through a sonic blender. What doesn't kill purists makes them stronger. This will put meat on any bones.

Ordering info: caseydriessen.com

Eclectica also has strong Flecktones ties, featuring Roy "Futureman" Wooten on drums and vocals and a guest spot by saxophonist Jeff Coffin, but *Streaming Video Soul* (ArtistShare 0068; 53:16) ★★★ reveals that the trio has its feet in the '60s, with musical references to Jimi Hendrix and a sense of wordplay straight out of Frank Zappa. Violinist Tracy Silverman has been playing professionally since 13, and demonstrates a broad spectrum of styles.

Ordering info: eclecticatheband.com

Spirited and dramatic, *En Homenaje A Astor Piazzolla* (Self-Released; 50:02) ★★★★★ is the product of a Colombian quartet, El Frente, dedicated to the Argentinian tango master's music. No surprise, then, that they play it so well, and with so much zeal. The balance between Manuel López's violin and Alejandro Ruiz's vibes is particularly effective, with Julio Cesar Sierra providing much of the gravitas on piano. Two versions of "Libertango"—one blazing studio take and a slightly more subdued live performance with Rodolfo Mederos on bandoneon—are highlights.

Ordering info: myspace.com/elfrentequartet

The influence of piquant violinist Stéphane Grappelli—particularly his work with the Quintette of the Hot Club of France—is so pervasive that there is a cottage industry in Hot Club tribute bands. *Notes Home* (Shandon 002; 56:21) ★★½ illustrates that the trend exists on both sides of the Atlantic. Irishmen David MacKenzie, violin, and Josh Johnston, piano, combine to work through 13 originals inspired by Grappelli and, to a lesser extent, Joe Venuti. While they've learned the style, they add little to what dozens of others have already done.

Ordering info: davidandjosh.com

In the studio and onstage, violinist Carla Kihlstedt and pianist Satoko Fujii exhibit impressive chemistry and an ability to range from explosive, atonal bursts to med-

Casey Driessen:
bluegrass twister



COURTESY CASEY DRIESSEN

itative minimalism. *Kuroi Kawa-Black River* (Tzadik 7720; 50:21/49:43) ★★★★★ combines a studio program of short interactions with long-form improvisations captured live at the 2008 Vancouver Jazz Festival. Even when the duo is thundering hard, nothing seems rushed between them, giving the impression that they are willing to let the music take them—and their audience—to untried places.

Ordering info: tzadik.com

While listeners who are attuned to contemporary string ensembles may wish the Quartet San Francisco had a bit more of an edge, *QSF Plays Brubeck* (ViolinJazz 106; 61:10) ★★½ finds some unusual angles inside nine Dave Brubeck compositions, Paul Desmond's "Take Five" and a Christmas standard. Best of all is Matt Brubeck's arrangement of "The Duke," which features gorgeous harmony and stirring counterpoint.

Ordering info: violinjazz.com

Remember when fusion music was underplayed rather than overblown and jazz-rock pioneers like Chick Corea and John McLaughlin reflected their appreciation of Miles Davis' sense of dynamics? Transplanted Dane Mads Tolling may not be 30 yet, but on *The Playmaker* (Madsman 01; 60:51) ★★★★★ he exhibits a restraint that would've been at home in Corea's original Return To Forever. Oh, yeah, he can also play a nasty version of Led Zeppelin's "Black Dog." With dedications to superstar musicians and sports heroes—as well as stars like Stanley Clarke and Stefon Harris in featured spots—Tolling is nothing if not eclectic. His second recording marks him as someone to watch.

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Ordering info: madstolling.com