

Soundcheck A-Z

This month's selected CDs, vinyl and downloads

Basic House

Oats

Alter CD/DL/LP

A cottage industry run from the scenic but somewhat remote Yorkshire seaside town of Redcar, Stephen Bishop's Opal Tapes remains one of 2013's most intriguing young DIY ventures. Recent attempts to define the label's remit as outsider House deceive slightly – demographically speaking, these are IDM producers in a time-honoured mould, not intrepid savants – but regardless, there's a plain appeal to Opal's acts of Techno disassembly and reassembly taking place right on the edge of the dancefloor.

As if in defiance of the name he gave it, Bishop's Basic House tips closer to the murk and hiss of vintage tape Industrial than a good portion of his roster. *Oats* tends towards the rhythmically simple but texturally complex, unfolding four-to-the-floor caked in crud and crust, with trace musical elements part-buried or loosely tethered, and left open to erosion and abrasion. On "AR II", snares prod testily, cymbals glint like knives, and where the clap after the beat should fall, there's swift jags of distortion. "Child Confession" commences with a brief idyllic glimpse of piano, plucked guitar and pipes before adopting a half-speed Techno plod, sporadically decorated by urgent whispers and Radiophonic gurgles. "Est Oan" commences with farmyard sounds, while "Interiors" might just feature a slowed down recording of a lawnmower traversing that awkward spot between the shed and the bird house.

However far out it goes, *Oats* retains the aura of a dance record, guided by rudimentary dynamics of groove, build and drop. Whether you can actually dance to it is a moot point (for that, look to recent Opal releases by Karen Gwyer and Patricia). Still, Bishop's music, and that of his label, is defined by this messy relationship between Noise abstraction and dancefloor traction, and *Oats* stands as a welcome invitation to get your hands dirty.

Louis Pattison

The Body

Christis, Redeemers

Thrill Jockey CD/2×LP

Oozing Wound

Retrash

Thrill Jockey CD/LP

Many indie-centric labels have signed Metal groups over the years, and the response from Metal fans is usually suspicion. That the groups in question are rarely aligned with prevailing trends in Metal leads to allegations of slumming. Metallers don't trust labels that sign acts from a position of ignorance, or worse, irony, and it's an open question whether indie labels aim to attract real diehards (this being a fairly stigmatised genre), or if they're just providing an opportunity for their regular listeners to play dress-up. Thrill Jockey,

home of The Body and Oozing Wound, is not a label most associate with the style, and the fact that they released the last album by post-Black Metal spiritualists Liturgy did more to damage their Metal credibility than bolster it.

The Body are a duo whose roots are in Doom and Sludge, with tendrils extended into Noise, modern composition and other hard to define areas. This is their fourth album, but their first for Thrill Jockey. It's an ambitious and sometimes breathtaking disc, bolstering their music's core elements – a sort of slow roar with martial pounding drums and ultra-high pitched screams in lieu of traditional vocals – with choirs and strings, as well as static electronic disruptions and meltdowns that recall *Pigs Of The Roman Empire*, Melvins' collaboration with Lustmord. This kind of Art Metal shares more traditional heavy rock's interest in grandeur and passion.

Oozing Wound are as decidedly un-grandiose as their name. Compounded from hammering drums, guitars and bass pushed through underpowered, malfunctioning amplifiers, plus raw-throated vocals, their style of Metal recalls Early Man, a duo whose first album was released on Matador. Oozing Wound frontman Zack Weil has an unending screech reminiscent of Destruction's Schmier, symbolising the group's mastery of a kind of primitive thrash with no goal greater than the release of energy.

Phil Freeman

Born Of Six

Svapti

Important CD

In Indian classical music, the tambura drone is much more than just a sound, it's a cosmo-scientific tool designed to both embody and engender the experience of eternity. As such, Western musicians with a more or less implicitly spiritual intent have regularly appropriated it – as on Catherine Christer Hennix's trance-inducing accompaniment to Henry Flynt's hillbilly raga, *Purified By Fire*. Here again, Hennix is involved in a longform piece that uses a tambura-like drone as bedrock – a work that seeks to merge the traditions of Indian dhruvap singing, Early Minimalism and Just Intonation.

While the tambura twang unfolds like a blossoming lotus, deeper drone tones arise to envelop and augment, and harmonics glint like jewels in sunbeams – played by Amelia Cuni on miriliton (a type of membranophone flute) and Werner Durand's self-made wind instruments. The piece doesn't progress as such, but as it becomes more present Cuni and Durand add extra textures – clogged, choking breaths and small, quicksilver whooshes – which constitute significant events in an essentially static piece. Throughout, Hennix's humming drone-vocals melt in and out of focus, and Cuni periodically interjects with vocal swoops and warbles in the traditional dhruvap style. In

the end, there is only the drone.

It would be easy, if you were so inclined, to scrutinise this work for intimations of cultural and spiritual tourism. Yet there's a sincerity about it – a yearning – that lends it a depth of meaning all its own. Like any form of meditation, this music aims to inculcate introspection and stillness.

Daniel Spicer

Elizabeth Brown

Mirage

New World CD

Too often the theremin has been a novelty instrument – its distinctive glissando can be disguised, though never eliminated. Brooklyn based theremin player, flautist and composer Elizabeth Brown has discovered how to exploit the instrument with genuine artistry, by balancing a whimsical quality, gentler than postmodern irony, with a serious intent. In particular, she's had the maverick genius to pair the theremin with the Harry Partch instrumentarium, and their meeting is represented in a captivating survey of compositions from the last decade – characterful pieces with a surreal, dreamlike edge.

On the opening *Seahorse*, Brown plays theremin alongside Newband, curators of Partch's instrumentarium, in an evocation of the creature's marine odysseys. Dean Drummond – Newband's founder, who died earlier this year – is on guitar, partnered by harmonic canon (which deploys two large sets of guitar strings), chromelodeon (adapted harmonium), diamond marimba, bass marimba and two of Drummond's creations, juststrokers and zoomoozophone. Partch confronted the European concert tradition with what Richard Kassel calls curmudgeonly but humane courage, and this delightful, capricious piece uses his Just Intonation instruments with a conviction rivalled only by their inventor's.

Two solo pieces are accompanied by sound recordings: the bucolic and eventful *Arcana* for flute, and the gauzy, almost hallucinatory "Three Arias" from *A Bookmobile For Dreamers* for theremin. Brown partners The Momenta Quartet on *Mirage* with shakuhachi, and *Piranesi*, with theremin – where the string quartet writing is more conventional. *Atlantic* felicitously matches the rival glissandos of theremin and Ben Verdery's classical guitar with slide. The finale is the idiomatic *Shinshofukei (Imagined Landscape)* for Japanese traditional music orchestra Pro Musica Nipponia. Overall a beautiful release.

Andy Hamilton

Taylor Ho Bynum Sextet And 7-tette

Navigation (The Complete Firehouse

Recordings)

Firehouse 12 2×CD/2×LP/2×CD+2×LP

Cornettist Taylor Ho Bynum has stood on the right hand of Bill Dixon and Anthony Braxton, two of the most rigorous thinkers/

composers/bandleaders to come out of the New Thing. This project's ambition and the requirements it imposes on listeners would likely please both mentors; since each is an educator who has spent decades trying to coax originality from students, they'd also be gratified that *Navigation* doesn't sound at all like music that either of them would make. Instead, Bynum has applied their lessons and examples to these four performances of the composition.

Until now, Bynum's records have been modestly dimensioned affairs. Not *Navigation*; it can be purchased as either a double LP of concert performances or a double CD of studio recordings, each of which comes with a download of the whole set. There's also an option to buy all four records together. The sheer bulk of the enterprise feels Braxtonian, and Braxton's influence is also evident in the construction of compositions from modular elements that can be strung together, rearranged, or even stacked up and played simultaneously. From Dixon, there's the idea that each performance is a one-time event that must be executed with the utmost seriousness, a determination to employ the complete brass vernacular, and an appreciation for the way a bit of quiet can make big sounds seem even bigger. Bynum has followed the example of both men by putting together a group of distinctive musicians who are nonetheless sympathetic to his intentions. The core trio of Bynum, guitarist Mary Halvorson and drummer Tomas Fujiwara has played together in numerous combos besides the Sextet, including some in which each has written for the others. Alto saxophonist Jim Hobbs and bass trombone/tuba player Bill Lowe have known Bynum for ever longer, and bassist Ken Filiano worked with him in Dixon's late ensembles. Percussionist Chad Taylor, the solo newcomer, joins the group on the two studio tracks.

Bynum seems more inclined to stick within the jazz vernacular than his two mentors; there are no appearances by Wolf Eyes, no iPods, no extended passages that sound like they were written from Webern's playbook. He plays and composes with more blues feeling here than either of them; add the right beat, and one of *Navigation*'s six component modules could have found a place in the Lee Morgan songbook. Another requires the horns to play Dolphy-like interval leaps in unisons, while others set up elongated expositions of brass texture and didgeridoo-like groans. But, like certain recent works by Ken Vandermark, *Navigation* uses modular construction to give a lot of freedom to the improvisors without entirely forgoing the cohesiveness provided by fixed compositional elements. The four takes on the piece start with different sections, and each moves from one section to the next in an order that's determined by the musicians on the spot. Since the performances run between 43 and 54 minutes in length, it's hard to accomplish

an A-B-C-D comparison. But still, you're likely to remember that Hobbs's long solo on "Navigation (Abstract XI)" is coarse enough to buff concrete, while the corresponding passage in "Abstract XIII" is articulated with fluid understatement.

Because the performances are uniformly spirited and studded with surprises, it's not a chore to play them in close proximity often enough to get renewed stimulation from their variations. Hasn't the deep mining of limited material been essential to jazz all along? Swing it, THB.

Bill Meyer

The Chills

Somewhere Beautiful

Fire CD/DL/LP

Orchestra Of Spheres

Vibration Animal Sex Brain Music

Fire CD/DL/LP

For all the changes within New Zealand music, The Chills remain. For all the changes within The Chills' many line-ups, Martin Phillipps also remains, and his songwriting has sustained them from their 1980 debut to this day. *Somewhere Beautiful* is a live album of sorts, the tracks recorded at a private party on New Year's Eve 2011. However, shorn of much crowd noise or banter, it operates more as an alternative greatest hits set lavishly packaged in artwork by New Zealand artist Shane Cotton. The driving pop fuelled by simple, incessant bass and guitar lines, combined with Phillipps's facility for a hook-laden melody, are showcased in faithful versions of "Pink Frost", "Wet Blanket", "Night Of The Chill Blue" and "I Love My Leather Jacket". *Somewhere Beautiful* also marks the beginning of the systematic reissue of The Chills' back catalogue, and allows them to take their rightful place as a warm, distinct and proudly independent voice in the rock pantheon.

New Zealand's physical isolation has always bred a culture of self-sufficiency. New Zealanders (half-) joke that anything can be fixed with number eight wire, the ubiquitous material used to patch fences. If that self-sufficiency can be heard in The Chills, it is certainly present in Orchestra Of Spheres' quirky Southern Hemisphere funk. Imagine George Clinton's Mothership landing on the peak of Mount Ruapehu and disgorging a band of outcast funksters. Short of supplies but high of heels and gaudy with glitter garb, they march to Wellington and insinuate their way into its underbelly, seizing instruments along the way.

Perhaps it didn't quite happen that way, but the music of *Vibration Animal Sex Brain Music*, from the pitter-pattering mid-funk of "Bogan In The Forest" via the funk-punk vocal athletics of "2,000,000 Years" to the sci-fi boogie of "Electric Company", makes you wonder how such a fresh take on funk found its way among us.

Nick Southgate

DalGLISH

Niaiw Ot Vile

Pan DL/LP

Chris Douglas's recordings under names like DalGLISH, OST, Scald Roughish and Seaes,

have striven to develop new pathways in electronic music that circumvent or go beyond convention or formula. On paper, the San Franciscan's work may appear to have walked a line from classic Techno formalism to abstraction, from throwing raves and collaborating with Detroit names like Underground Resistance and Drexciya back in the mid-1990s, to the dense and detailed electronic and musique concrète techniques of his current work. This, though, overlooks one key hallmark of his music: a powerful emotional quality shaped in apparent defiance of any familiar or well-worn sentimental cues.

This is every bit the case with *Niaiw Ot Vile*, which is a tribute of sorts to his friend Wai Cheng, founder of Isolate Records, who died in 2006. Its ten tracks retain a slightly clinical composure, titled in IDM machine code style ("Out_Kutzk", "Oidhche"). Still, for all the coldness of its exterior, eulogistic intent shines through. Beneath the surface of digital clicks, zips and flutters move slow melodic tides, lending tracks a sombre colouring that approximate the quality of mourning. "Venpin" rings with stray piano notes, the ring of gongs and chimes. "Seit Nuin" is pared back to a diaphanous, barely there melody in the vein of The Aphex Twin's *Selected Ambient Works Volume II*, while on "Ciaradh", shimmering synthesized tones ring out with the gentle delicacy of solo harp music. There is much poignancy to *Niaiw Ot Vile*, but its emotional unfolding never feels obvious or spelt out. Its meaning is not wholly scrutable; but then, nor is grief. Louis Pattison

Iancu Dumitrescu

Pierres Sacrées/Hazards And Tectonics

Ideologic Organ DL/LP

Any self-respecting Dumitrescu fan will have both of these pieces already. *Pierres Sacrées* (1989–91) was released in the early 1990s, and the more recent *Hazards And Tectonics* (2009–13) can be found on the *Electronic Music* CD published on Dumitrescu's own Edition Modern label a few months back. Regardless, it's a pleasure to hear these compositions on what is for Dumitrescu a rare vinyl release, to savour the juxtaposition of two of his heaviest compositions – an unsurprisingly forthright selection from the Stephen O'Malley-curated Ideologic Organ imprint – and to observe the evolution in his compositional technique.

The 14 minute *Pierres Sacrées* is a brutal work for prepared piano, metallic plates and objects, although typically the sounds are cleverly disguised and many of its more intense passages could be electronic in origin. The piece swells elementally, exploding dramatically from slow moving acoustic rumblings into vicious, serrated noise blasts, expansive in scope but intricately detailed. Written almost two decades later, *Hazards And Tectonics* is just as volatile but harder to pin down. Although it's credited as computer assisted music, at its premiere in Glasgow in May the piece's instrumentation included electric guitars, prepared piano and percussion. If they're present on this version, then they've been

very heavily treated. *Hazards And Tectonics* tracks the progress of a wildly asynchronous mass of sound whose various strands seem to head in differing directions all at once. At various points it coheres into an algorithmic waveform or an oscillating frequency, leaping unpredictably between background and foreground. Elsewhere it disintegrates into tone fragments or disappears into near-silence before reconfiguring itself and rearing violently back into earshot.

Nick Cain

Ex-Easter Island Head

Mallet Guitars Three

Low Point DL/LP

Not the first musicians to lay their instruments down and strike them out of curiosity not anger, Ex-Easter Island Head nevertheless bring a welcome freshness to tabletop guitar. The Merseyside group are currently a trio, although their 2011 collaboration with the scratch ensemble aPAT saw them swell to 27 when performing *Music For Moai Hava* at Liverpool's World Museum in front of an actual Easter Island statue. With their solid-bodied electric guitars tuned to open chords and clean of effects, they use mallets, wooden sticks and bowing with Allen keys, as well as Yuri Landman-inspired third-bridge additions. It may suggest a confrontational, abrasive attack, but the sounds are soft-edged, more a song gently coaxed than a bruising encounter.

Recorded live, *Mallet Guitars Three* thrums with a growing confidence and compositional adventurousness. Echoes of Rhys Chatham, Steve Reich and Glenn Branca are easily discerned among its shifting overtones and propulsive clockwork rhythms; yet the scale of their third album is intimate, with its four connected parts totalling under half an hour. Freed from the plectrum method of tension followed by release, the mood is euphoric rather than aggressive.

Notably, the two bookending movements eschew rhythmic pulse in favour of blurred and twinkling textures. The first opens with plangent chimes and lingering harmonic shadows before unfolding into part sonic chandelier, part mythical Sirens' island; the conclusion luxuriates in glistening multiphonics reminiscent of Vibracathedral Orchestra's ecstatic hive mind. In between, the clattering wooden sticks, nagging micro-melodies and subtle shifts in perspective travel more familiar minimalist paths. Yet, with human imprecision trumping metronomic accuracy, the repetition is playful rather than intense, more akin to a stroll through a bamboo forest than being hammered with mallets.

Abi Bliss

Faint Wild Light

Faint Wild Light

Digitalis DL/LP

Given James Ginzburg's recent collaborations with Subtext's Paul Purgas as Emptyset, you might expect something more monochrome and minimal from his solo project Faint Wild Light, but its pastoral folk-pop couldn't get any farther away from Emptyset's brutalist bass constructions.

The album reveals Ginzburg's hitherto hidden talent for subtly psychedelic songcraft. He also has an unexpectedly affecting voice – shades of Super Furry Animals' Gruff Rhys and Pink Floyd's Rick Wright. The incongruity might prove a selling point in itself, but the material is substantial enough to carry its own weight.

Although Ginzburg is a Washington, DC émigré, *Faint Wild Light* nevertheless could be retroactively appended to Nonsuch or *Apple Venus Vol 1*. "Darker" has the feel of an early King Crimson or Caravan outtake with its distant piano and lurching, unanchored riffs. In all, *Faint Wild Light* is an unexpected detour that says much for its author's versatility.

Joseph Stannard

Josephine Foster

I'm A Dreamer

Fire CD/DL/LP

Foster has occasionally chosen themes for her albums – the poems of Emily Dickinson (*Graphic As A Star*) or songs by Federico Garcia Lorca (*Anda Jaleo*), for example. Recorded in Nashville, *I'm A Dreamer* isn't so specific in its intentions, but looks back to the bar-room blues of 1920s and 30s and the roots of Country music.

Such period songs suit Foster's unique voice. As she slides across the notes she hits an ethereal sweetness at the top of her range, sounding either very young or very old, and when this contrasts with her precise enunciation and the bluesy bite of her lower register, it sounds uncanny and a little sinister. This is heard on "No One's Calling Your Name", where if you look under the apparent surface sweetness, "*Baby it's true, baby it's sad*" seems to be delivered with little pity. The same goes for the dismissive, tangy "*You call my name, but I don't answer*" on the statement of independence, "Sugarpie I'm Not The Same". "Amuse A Muse" is more sardonic still, a sort of memento mori with the misused muse's flesh rotting away.

While *I'm A Dreamer* looks back the best part of a century, sepia cover photo and all, it never simply lapses into pastiche. On "My Wandering Heart", a strong melody is allied to unexpected chord changes and structural twists. The musicians supply sparse double bass, drums and electric guitar backing to Foster's voice and nylon string guitar, but Micah Hulscher's piano playing stands out. He takes the roaming blues style further out than usual, commenting on the melody and becoming agitated both rhythmically and harmonically, without ever splintering off completely.

Mike Barnes

Neil Michael Hagerty & The Howling Hex

The Hildreth Tapes

Golden Lab 3xLP

This colossal collection is the result of a project put into motion by Golden Lab's Nick