



*Secret Treetop*

Annie Chen Octet (Shanghai Audio & Video Ltd.Co.)  
by Alex Henderson

Traditional Asian music has influenced a variety of jazz improvisers over the years and the folk traditions of China and neighboring countries are a prominent influence on Annie Chen's *Secret Treetop*, which underscores her talents as a vocalist, composer and bandleader. Chen was born in Beijing but has lived in New York City since 2013, where she leads the working group heard on this album—a cohesive ensemble of David Smith (trumpet and flugelhorn), Alex LoRe (alto saxophone and flute), Rafal Sarnecki (guitar and arrangements), Tomoko Omura (violin), Glenn Zaleski (piano), Matthew Muntz (bass) and Jerad Lippi (drums). Although Chen interprets a few traditional folk songs, her own compositions dominate. And she is as adept at writing lyrics as she is composing melodies.

Chen draws on traditional Chinese or Mongolian music with "Ao Bao Xiang Hui" (a well-known Mongolian standard) and "Majo Kiki in 12 Days" as well as "Gan Lan Shu" (a Taiwanese favorite), "Leaving Sonnet" and the title track. The modal improvisations on the hypnotic opener "Ozledim Seni" have a strong Middle Eastern/Arabic flavor, yet on "Mr. Wind-Up Bird, Strange Yearning", she gets into some wordless scat vocals that bring to mind Brazilian jazz singers like Flora Purim and Ithamara Koorax.

Adding to the album's lack of predictability is Chen's ability to perform in different languages. Depending on the mood she is in, Chen can scat, sing in English or sing in Mandarin. Chen's use of the latter serves her well on "Gan Lan Shu", but she is equally expressive performing original English lyrics on "My Ocean Is Blue in White", "Orange Tears Lullaby", the title track and "Majo Kiki in 12 Days".

Chen has been an active performer in New York City for half a decade now. And as the memorable *Secret Treetop* demonstrates, she is a welcome addition to the city's jazz scene.

For more information, visit [anniechenjazz.com](http://anniechenjazz.com). Chen is at Cornelia Street Underground Oct. 19th and Tomi Jazz Oct. 27th. See Calendar.



*Tell Me The Truth*  
Roseanna Vitro (Skyline)  
by Jim Motavalli

"I've always had a deep Texas blues side," says vocalist Roseanna Vitro. She broadens her palette to take in songs from her "deepest roots"—Allen Toussaint, Mose Allison, Jon Hendricks, Everly Brothers and even Creedence's John Fogerty. The results are mixed, but mostly pretty listenable. Vitro is in fine voice throughout, but some of this Americana material isn't at its best in a jazz context. It would have made more sense for her to have simply crafted a roots country record. The Southern Roots Band backing her

is great but more 52nd Street than Nashville.

Albert Brumley's much-recorded "I'll Fly Away", for instance, is never going to be anything but country gospel and jazzy piano doesn't really make it come alive. The Everlys' "When Will I Be Loved" is better with the brothers' harmonies but Mitch Stein offers a nice, bluesy guitar solo. Vitro slows down Jon Hendricks' "Tell Me the Truth" and seems to be holding it at arms' length a bit. You'd think she'd jump right into its jazzy hooks. On the other hand, Vitro inhabits the southern-fried soul of Boz Scaggs' "I'll Be Long Gone" with total commitment. The horns work, but they were there on the original, too. Mose Allison's "Your Mind is on Vacation" is somewhat over-recorded, but this version—Bonnie Raitt's take on his "Everybody's Cryin' Mercy" set the template—is pretty fine. Nathan Eklund's trumpet shines. The Staples Singers had the hit with "Respect Yourself" and gave it a funkier treatment than we get here but Vitro's duet with singer Al Chestnut is nonetheless tasty. Vitro embraces a down-tempo "Walking After Midnight"; Patsy Cline's original was mostly pedal steel and voice, but Vitro turns it into a torch ballad led by Mark Soskin's lovely piano. She finds the funk in Toussaint's "On Your Way Down", sticking pretty close to Little Feat's version. The horns get to stretch out and Stein is back on Feat-friendly guitar.

Vitro deserves credit for getting out of Tin Pan Alley and taking some chances.

For more information, visit [store.cdbaby.com/cd/roseannavitro](http://store.cdbaby.com/cd/roseannavitro). Vitro is at Jazz at Kitano Oct. 13th as part of a Bob Dorrough tribute. See Calendar.



*Outspoken: The Music Of The Legendary Hasaan*  
Brian Marsella Trio (Tzadik)  
by Andrey Henkin

If you went into Times Square and started asking strangers about jazz musicians, most would know, or at least have heard of, Miles Davis. Far fewer would know Charles Mingus. A handful may be familiar with Eric Dolphy. Start asking random people about Hasaan Ibn Ali and you'll get picked up by Homeland Security.

Even pianist Brian Marsella admitted not knowing about Ali (né William Henry Langford, Jr.) in the liner notes to this album. Apart from a 1964 Atlantic album under drummer Max Roach's name and a pair of lost (but now found) sessions of his own for Atlantic the following year, the pianist was undocumented and died in obscurity outside of his native Philadelphia in 1980 at 49.

Marsella is ideal for this tribute. Last year saw him tackling the music of another iconoclastic composer/player in John Zorn and Marsella, like Ali, is from Philadelphia. Adding to the authenticity is an all-Philly band of bassist Christian McBride (with whom Marsella had not previously worked) and drummer Anwar Marshall (with whom he had) and an inner photo of Marsella dressed like Ali on the CD cover.

Unlike, say, a Monk tribute, there is not the issue of what music to include. Here are six of the seven Ali-penned tracks from the aforementioned Roach album, one piece from the lost sessions and a Marsella original, "A Jawn for Hasaan". But Ali isn't going to be found in *The Real Book* so fedoras off to Marsella for his heavy transcription work to bring this project to fruition.

Philly saxophonist Odean Pope (who was on those lost Ali sessions, several years before first appearing officially on record with Catalyst), said of the pianist

during their days together in Philadelphia: "He was so modern...Every tune that he played he created his own chord changes and his own concepts." Listeners today, some 53 years later, inculcated by Monk, Andrew Hill, Jason Moran, etc., may not be as intimidated by Ali's compositions yet should be awed by the mixture of the cerebral and the visceral, a school of piano playing that fell out of favor during Ali's heyday.

A tune like the opener, "Three-Four Vs. Six-Eight Four-Four Ways", the title of which points to the time signature shifts contained therein, has the scope and invention of classical études, a gloriously nervous introduction to Ali's conception. "Pay Not Play Not" has the feeling of hurtling off a cliff, only to float down on gentle swing. Tempo shifts in "Almost Like Me" are mesmerizing, like staring into an old washing machine as it lurches through its cycles. There are shades of Monk in some of the pieces, a particular lobe felt internally, particularly on "Off My Back Jack", which begins with a remarkable three-and-a-half minute Marsella introduction, almost half the tune's length. "Din-Ka Street" is the most inventive of all the compositions and explains why, as Pope recalled, saxophonists would get off jam session stages when Ali arrived. So much happens in nearly nine minutes, so many eras bridged and styles touched upon, who knew enough music to play along?

Marsella brings circus-like virtuosity to this project, recalling not only the Zorn project but also his work with Cyro Baptista. McBride is in all his trad glory and he and Marshall, much like Art Davis and Roach decades ago, are the ballast that keep this inimitable balloon from floating away to the stratosphere.

For more information, visit [tzadik.com](http://tzadik.com). This project is at The Stone at The New School Oct. 8th. See Calendar.

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