

# UNSEEN WORLDS

BY ERIC WENDELL

“Our motto is groundbreaking, yet accessible, avant garde music,” says Tommy McCutchon, founder of the New York-based label Unseen Worlds. Since its inception in 2006, Unseen Worlds has eschewed the notion of genre and focuses instead on the idea of avant garde music that traverses categorization in a way that is agreeable yet dynamic in execution.

The output of Unseen Worlds displays a who’s who of underground musicians never quite at the forefront of the avant garde movement but noteworthy and important nonetheless. Whether it is the pianistic minimalism of Ukrainian composer Lubomyr Melnyk, off-kilter jazz flow of singer Maria Monti or computer music tapestry of Laurie Spiegel, Unseen Worlds’ music output proves that the avant garde is not a genre in and of itself but rather an important spice in the forward-thinking approach of all music.

While McCutchon himself is neither a musician nor did he grow up in a musical household, he was an appreciator of music. As a young man in Corpus Christi, TX, McCutchon was not exposed to music that wasn’t part of the car-radio culture that Texas had to offer at the time. At 18, McCutchon began to make friends who had a more outside-the-box taste in music, which so happened to coincide with a job he had at the audio-visual library at the college he was attending. It was the music that challenged regular convention that McCutchon gravitated towards. McCutchon states,

“It became clear that avant garde music happened to be a personal taste. Although I enjoy all kinds of music, I find that when I’m left alone avant garde music is what I tend to like to explore the most.”

From appreciator/fan to starting a record label is quite a leap in growth and development. The idea of starting a label was initially not McCutchon’s idea, but rather that of his friend Neil Fauerso. The genesis of the name stemmed from when McCutchon “first came across the word-pairing Unseen Worlds through the Laurie Spiegel CD of the same name. In the liner notes she explains how she discovered the term from a passage in the [ancient Chinese text] *I Ching*. I felt a shared sense that, though each person through their unique life experiences starts to build a worldview that is ultimately never knowable, certain kinds of music hold you in a place that builds an empathy that is world-opening. It was doubly perfect since the music I wanted to release I felt was under-recognized.”

Unseen World’s first release was pianist/composer “Blue” Gene Tyranny’s debut *Out of the Blue*. Originally released on the label Lonely Music in 1975, the album is a rich tapestry of chamber pop, classical and rock music swishes and sways through a haze of ‘70s pop sonic landscapes. McCutchon stated, “It’s a perfect record in my eyes and really set a high bar for everything that came after it, which I’ve tried to stay true to. I was extremely lucky to have Blue be the first artist I worked with on the label. He truly has the most kind, generous and brilliant soul.”

Critics were quick to point out the musical juggling that Tyranny was able to achieve on the album with *Pitchfork* contributor Dominique Leone stating in his review that the album is, “an eclectic pop/country/

funk/sonic tone poem record that finds precisely zero company in any genre I can think of.” Tyranny’s 2012 release *Detours* was the first album of wholly original music that Unseen Worlds has released. The biggest challenge that McCutchon faced with *Detours* was usurping control of the final output, stating the difference between reissuing records as opposed to releasing new material being “letting go of the control of what exact sounds would be coming out through Unseen Worlds, which is pretty standard for most labels but was new for me.” *Detours* was met with similar successes with contributor Clifford Allen in his review for *Tinytapes.com* stating, “at its heart, *Detours* is an album of solo piano meditations, rhapsodic, elegant and deeply tied to the performer’s inventive hands and mind.”

While over ten years in, McCutchon still finds that the growing pains of running a label are still there. “Perhaps the best lesson I’ve learned is that when you find yourself digging a hole, the best way to get out is to stop digging. Don’t keep digging as if it will help you get to the other side. Patience is the best tool for climbing out,” McCutchon stated.

While McCutchon does not think there has been a particular release that has been the shining example of what Unseen Worlds can do, McCutchon believes that others have taken note of Unseen Worlds’ style of releasing records. “I definitely felt like there was a well-established proliferation of labels and releases that were kind of directly or indirectly touching on the approach I started with and it felt like ‘mission accomplished’ in a sense, because the conversation had shifted more in our favor.”

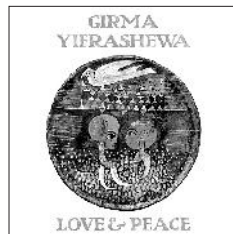
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*Out of the Blue*  
“Blue” Gene Tyranny



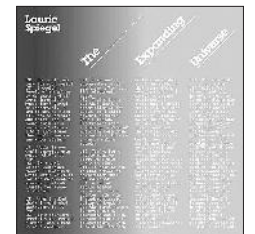
*Fifteen Saxophones*  
Dickie Landry



*Love & Peace*  
Girma Yifirashewa



*El Bestiario*  
Maria Monti



*The Expanding Universe*  
Laurie Spiegel

## VOXNEWS

# SIX DEGREES OF JONI

BY SUZANNE LORGE

Canadian-born singer/songwriter **Joni Mitchell**, ninth on *Rolling Stone’s* list of The 100 Greatest Songwriters of All Time, turns 75 this month. Though best known as a ‘70s folk-pop musician, Mitchell’s jazz influences run deep: she’s collaborated with the likes of Jaco Pastorius, Wayne Shorter, Herbie Hancock, Pat Metheny and, most notably, Charles Mingus. Jazz singers love interpreting Joni Mitchell material because of this jazz influence—the innately singable melodies, the deeply colored harmonies, the poetic lyrics.

To understand just how beloved Mitchell is among jazz singers, here’s a quick (unofficial and incomplete) list of those who’ve recorded Mitchell songs: Karrin Allyson, Becca Stevens, Cheryl Bentley, Theo Bleckmann, Ann Hampton Callaway, Fay Claasen, Holly Cole, Denise Donatelli, Michael Feinstein, Melody Gardot, Sara Gazarek, Diana Krall, Karin Krog, Amy London, Jane Monheit, Judy Niemack, John Proulx, Diane Reeves, Janis Siegel, Bria Skonberg, Luciana Souza, Cassandra Wilson and Andrea Wolper. Songbook composers aside, is there another popular songwriter so well represented in vocal jazz?

Rhode Island-based **Debra Mann**, who credits

Mitchell’s work as the inspiration for her own career in jazz, is the most recent singer to launch a Mitchell tribute disc. The album, *Full Circle: The Music of Joni Mitchell* (Whaling City Sound) tackles a dozen of Mitchell’s better-known tunes (“Circle Game”, “Big Yellow Taxi”, “A Case Of You”); Mann’s fresh arrangements and expert phrasing provide a new context for the material, even as the singer references Mitchell’s own unique vocal sound. With this album Mann joins the ranks of singers offering compelling, definitive interpretations of The Mitchell Songbook.

**Madeleine Peyroux**, who performed Mitchell’s classic “River” on her charting album *Half The Perfect World* (Rounder), again joins with long-time producer Larry Klein (Mitchell’s former husband, bassist and producer), on her celebrated new release *Anthem* (Decca). Like Mitchell, Peyroux wields the pen like a scalpel in dissecting the human psyche; each of the 10 originals on the disc, co-written with her impressive rhythm section, speak of both personal and societal loss—and offer a remedy. The surprisingly upbeat “All My Heroes” finds redemption in the failings of our lauded artists. The slow blues “The Ghosts of Tomorrow” contains a hint of hope despite the litany of ills on review. And Peyroux, on her cool version of the title cut—a call to greater social awareness by the late Leonard Cohen—impresses with her restrained delivery. Sometimes the softest voice reverberates the loudest.

Singer **Cécile McLorin Salvant** hasn’t recorded a

Joni Mitchell song, but in interviews she cites the singer/songwriter’s influence on her musicianship and she did perform Mitchell’s “All I Want” with pianist Fred Hersch in performance. And like Mitchell, Salvant is an expressionistic painter of considerable ability who lends her visual artistry to her album covers. Beyond this, Salvant brings a depth of feeling to her work recalling Mitchell’s own. On her new release, *The Window* (Mack Avenue), for example, Salvant reaches deep into her gut in her renderings of Leonard Bernstein’s “Somewhere” and Al Alberts’ “Tell Me Why”. She misses nary a step on this unabashedly open and moving album, recorded live at Village Vanguard with piano (Sullivan Fortner) only.

Also on this record Salvant covers “The Peacocks”, the haunting tune by Jimmy Rowles with lyrics added later by British singer **Norma Winstone** (who recorded Mitchell’s “Two Grey Rooms” on her 2014 album for Basho Records, *Westerly*). Winstone has her own 2018 release, *Descansado: Songs for Films* (ECM), a gorgeous assemblage of soundtrack themes from classic films, many with new lyrics by Winstone. Besides the title cut, Winstone contributes lyrics to the themes from *Il Postino*, *Henry V* and *Taxi Driver*. A masterful achievement.

More celebration: jazz child and NEA Jazz Master **Sheila Jordan** shares a birthday month with Mitchell. Jordan kicks off her 90th year with the Steve Kuhn Trio at Blue Note (Nov. 26th). ❖