

MUSIC REVIEW

## ‘Last Desert’ by Liberty Ellman Review: Moving Out of His Own Shadow

The new album from the jazz guitarist might be even more influential than his 2015 record ‘Radiate.’



Jazz guitarist Liberty Ellman

By *Martin Johnson*

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With Liberty Ellman’s stellar 2015 recording “Radiate” (Pi Recordings), the guitarist moved out of the long shadow of the illustrious musicians for whom he had been a sideman—most notably composer and reedman Henry Threadgill, a colleague for almost two decades. On Mr. Ellman’s new release, “Last Desert” (Pi Recordings), he begins to escape his own shadow—the one cast by “Radiate.”

Mr. Ellman’s album from five years ago was one of the best of the decade. Working with a unique sextet that included bassist Stephan Crump, tubaist Jose Davila, trumpeter Jonathan Finlayson, saxophonist Steve Lehman, and drummer Damion Reid—each a virtuoso—Mr. Ellman offered music of great intricacy and rhythmic innovation. The connection to Mr. Threadgill’s band Zooid was reinforced by the presence of Mr. Davila, whose work is a distinctive part of that group. “Last Desert” features the same unit found on its predecessor, but the guitarist’s compositions are deeper and more complex, and the solos stand out more.

The 45-minute program begins with “The Sip,” an elegantly ruminative piece that features impressive solos by the leader and each of the horn players. It is followed by the title track, which was inspired by the annual “4 Deserts” ultramarathon that is scheduled to take place this year across grueling terrain in Mongolia, Georgia, Chile, Namibia and Antarctica. In the press materials that accompany the recording, Mr. Ellman said of the event, “there is something profound about the idea that these athletes have the will to compete in the most severe environments on earth.” He continued, “our species needs people with that level of tenacity to lead the way toward the future.”

The composition is presented in two sections. The first begins with a gentle trumpet introduction that establishes the tone for the piece; it gives way to a tuba-drums duet that is followed by a bass and guitar segment, before the rest of the ensemble re-enters, and concludes with a guitar solo. For all of the hypermodernity of Mr. Ellman’s composing, his solo style on this track and elsewhere on the recording is a throwback; his pristine tone and clear melodic lines would fit easily into a recording from the ’50s or ’60s. Mr. Finlayson follows with softly probing solos that also feel rooted in an earlier era, the ’70s and ’80s. The second part begins more insistently with a gritty saxophone solo by Mr. Lehman backed by propulsive drumming from Mr. Reid. This gives way to an unaccompanied solo by Mr. Davila, then Messrs. Ellman and Finlayson re-enter and drive the tune to its conclusion.

Other highlights include “Rubber Flowers,” the most up-tempo song on the recording. The solos are concise and forceful, and they are propelled by a furious cascade of rhythms from Mr. Reid. “Doppler,” a bouncy piece toward the end, encapsulates some of Mr. Ellman’s compositional brilliance. The horns begin the piece with crisp, staccato lines that accent the percussion and tuba; this builds tension that resolves with a lyrical solo by Mr. Finlayson. These are followed in rapid succession by short statements from Mr. Finlayson, Mr. Lehman and Mr. Ellman that move the music forward. Despite the complex, chamber feel of Mr. Ellman’s tunes, they are a showcase for the impressive skills of the individual members of his band.

Mr. Ellman is 48 years old and grew up in New York and the Bay Area. Besides Mr. Threadgill, he was influenced by his work with the innovative saxophonist and composer Steve Coleman, who also favors highly elastic rhythms. Mr. Ellman’s music embodies many of the defining trends in jazz today. His compositions are ambitious; he blurs the boundaries between frontline and rhythm responsibilities, the solos rarely return to a theme but push the songs into new sonic ground, and the improvisations often announce a lineage.

Most musicians build their craft through jam sessions where their peers advertise their prowess with extended solos on a familiar tune, and the trend toward more thoroughly composed chamber jazz where solos are far shorter represents a sort of polar opposite. But Mr. Ellman’s work here strikes a different balance. It’s far from a blowing session, but his band members get more space than usual.

“Last Desert” doesn’t fully escape the shadow of “Radiate” as much as it presents a new level of growth for a superb band. “Radiate” defined a wing of jazz in 2015. It’s entirely possible that five years from now, the same will be said about “Last Desert.”

—*Mr. Johnson writes about jazz for the Journal.*