

Michel Benita

Looking at Sounds

Michel Benita: double bass, laptop; **Matthieu Michel:** flugelhorn; **Jozef Dumoulin:** Fender Rhodes, electronics; **Philippe Garcia:** drums, electronics

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A musician at the heart of the French jazz scene since the early 1980s, Michel Benita (born in Algiers in 1954) honed his craft in the clubs and concert halls of Paris, working with an ever-changing cast of visiting stars, local players and expatriates. The original bassist in France's Orchestre National de Jazz, he is by temperament an internationalist, welcoming the different accents and independent viewpoints that players from diverse regions can bring to group music. Benita made his ECM debut as a member of Andy Sheppard's Trio Libero, in 2011, also appearing on Sheppard's *Surrounded by Sea* (2014) and *Romaria* (2017). His first disc as a leader for the label was *River Silver*, recorded in 2015, with his group Ethics.

The quartet on *Looking At Sounds* retains Swiss flugelhornist Matthieu Michel and French drummer Philippe Garcia from the Ethics line-up and adds Belgian keyboardist Jozef Dumoulin. Largely responsible for the textural qualities of the revised group's music Dumoulin uses his Fender Rhodes in a subtle, painterly way. His enveloping colours swirl around the harmonic framework of the pieces and imaginatively support the flights of the flugelhorn. If Matthieu Michel's is often the lead voice, Benita's group concept favours collective creativity over chains of solos. He encourages his musicians to build upon the melodic ramifications of the tunes and to "melt into a total, global sound," a policy well-illustrated on the tune "Body Language" here.

With the exception of Matthieu Michel, who plays only flugelhorn on this recording, with a free, lyrical flair sometimes reminiscent of the late Kenny Wheeler, all members of the group make discreet use of electronics. Benita will periodically add a bass drone from his laptop. Garcia integrates real-time sampling into his percussive work. And Dumoulin processes his Rhodes through many effects boxes, pedals and reverbs to create a luminous patina of sound – see for instance the beginning of the title track, "Looking At Sounds", whose name is its programme. "I like using a little electronics, as an additional instrument, almost, or to give the music a new direction," says Michel Benita "even if our group spirit and our sense of dynamics are more those of an acoustic band."

Benita writes most of the ensemble's material, his compositions often built around a strong melodic line, a tendency that may reflect the bassist's deep affection for folk music, which has long paralleled his commitment to jazz. The inclusion of "Berceuse" by the Breton harpist and singer Kristen Noguès mirrors this interest; the piece flows naturally into Benita's "Gwell Talenn." Love of melody also accounts for the presence of Antônio Carlos Jobim's "Inútil Paisagem" which, in another transition, emerges from the Benita-composed "Elisian." The lyrical impulse, in fact, underpins all pieces, including "Cloud to Cloud", a group improvisation created in the studio.

The album begins with bass harmonics from Benita, and Garcia playing his kit with his hands on "Dervish Diva". Bassist and drummer, musical partners for more than 20 years now (including a long period with trumpet player Erik Truffaz) play together with a shared feeling for rhythmic elasticity.

"Islander" is an autobiographical reference, alluding to Benita's home base on L'île d'Yeu, off the west coast of France but also, with its syncopated rhythms, and hints of dubstep, to islands far away. "Low Tide" lilts very gently, with a nocturnal feel that is extended in the album's final track, an unaccompanied bass performance of Jule Styne's "Never Never land", once again making evident Michel Benita's feeling for melody and its implications.

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Michel Benita has played with outstanding improvisers including Archie Shepp, Dewey Redman, Horace Parlan, Billy Hart, Joe Lovano, Bobo Stenson, Enrico Rava, Dino Saluzzi, Lee Konitz, Harold Danko, Jon Christensen, Joshua Redman, Tom Harrell, Roy Haynes, Charlie Mariano, Peter Erskine, Kenny Wheeler, Steve Kuhn, Kenny Werner, Enrico Pieranunzi, François Jeanneau, Daniel Humair, Michel Portal, Toots Thielemans, Martial Solal,

Rita Marcotulli, and many more. In addition to work with his own groups and with Andy Sheppard, recent activities have included appearances with Manu Codjia, Mieko Miyazaki, Florian Weber and Markus Stockhausen.

Pianist Jozef Dumoulin's background includes study with John Taylor in Cologne. He has shaped a new and personal language for the Fender Rhodes, one that bypasses both jazz-rock and funk, the idioms with which the instrument has been associated. *Looking At Sounds* marks his ECM debut. Dumoulin leads several projects including the improvisation ensemble Orca Noise Unit, with Bruno Chevillon, Toma Gouband, Antonin Tri Hoang and Sylvaine Hélyary, and has also recorded in duo with fellow pianist Benoît Delbecq.

In addition to his work with Benita, flugelhornist Matthieu Michel has been heard previously on ECM in the group of singer Susanne Abbuehl on *The Gift*. Recent live work has included guest appearances with Nik Bärtsch's Ronin, and with Wolfgang Muthspiel. Early in 2020 he contributed to sessions for Elina Duni's forthcoming album.

Philippe Garcia studied at the Lyon Conservatory and has played across the genres from classical music to free improvising. He lived for several years in Turkey where he was a member of the Istanbul Symphony, taught percussion in Ankara, and accompanied local artists. Early in his career he played with Don Cherry and Barre Phillips and worked with choreographer Carolyn Carlson.

Looking At Sounds was recorded at Studios La Buissonne in Pernes-les-Fontaines, France, in March 2019.

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