

"The only real change comes from inside" as the Carolina rapper does on "Inside". Perhaps significantly, the best track by some distance is "Neighbours", a true story revealing the perils of recording music while black in a white neighbourhood. It's also the only track told from Cole's own perspective.

## Hodgy

### Fireplace: *TheNotTheOtherSide*

Odd Future CD/DL

It's hard to say exactly who Hodgy's addressing on "Resurrection" when he complains, "You say you're hearing me out but I don't believe you're hearing me fully", given how at this stage of the Odd Future saga attention is in short supply for any alumni who aren't called Frank Ocean. It's a damn shame because Hodgy's official solo debut *Fireplace: TheNotTheOtherSide* is a confused but compulsive listen. It opens with his mum warning him he could die in five seconds and closes with him claiming his baby momma doesn't love him any more, "Probably cos I ain't shit". In between there's no shortage of witty existential trauma and desperate energy. On "Kundalini" the devil is an asshole whose needling traumatises Hodgy more than popping zits. He replies with prayer and claims status as a hierophant, as the song climaxes in mock exorcism over frayed elastic bass. Two tracks later he voices unusual ambition, "I want to spread positivity like it's leprosy, Lord". A few of the more pained moments grate but ultimately what lingers is his vitality in battling those demons, the inspirational energy of someone who can admit with sly confidence that "I'm OK with not having it all figured out".

## Bobbie Johnson

### You & I

Escape Route Media CD/DL

At her worst Brighton's Bobbie Johnson is an impossibly brilliant performer radiating righteous anger and eloquent melancholia, something like Little Simz might sound if she had got fully grown before getting famous. "Problem" is perhaps the best evidence here. Caught between work and creativity, it attempts to fill emotional voids with casual intimacy, confessing "I'm a damn fool for falling again for a woman over pen and my writing takes a hit as we take another hit, laying in my bed". At her best she's a sleek synthesis of Tricky and Estelle and London Posse's Bionic on transcendently hip form, describing herself as "that saggy titted bitch with an aggy shitty lip" on "Bang", or half cut on brandy and hash shouting out struggling Southern Rail commuters on the blissed out calm of "Cool, Fine". In either mode she's a vital voice in British rap, unique even in these relatively pluralist times.

## P Money

### Live + Direct

Rinse CD/DL

It says everything of P Money's character that he chose to release *Live + Direct* at the tail end of 2016, way past the point where he could tackle Skepta's *Konnichiwa* for the spot of token grime album in mainstream

year-end charts but too early to stake a claim as this year's heir to the throne. Truth is he seems far too modest to contemplate such moves. Solid solo catalogue and ten years service as part of old school grime crew OG'z notwithstanding, he lacks the will to power but ultimately *Live + Direct* is a much better album for his modesty. On "Keepin' It Real" he compares himself to JME and in integrity they have common ground but he's nowhere near as smug. When he says he's got "that real easy to embrace music", the description is on point. For all his chat on a misspent youth being on a "crimewatch ting" in "Welcome To England", the aura that lingers is that track's offhand pairing of "ghetto youth club" and "gang" in a single breath of grown man pride.

## Lee Scott

### Nice Swan

Blah CD/DL/LP/MC

It's difficult to get past the delicious irony of opening track "Bootlegliving", soaking up the relish in scouse veteran Lee Scott's voice. It seems he felt much the same way recording it. His label Blah is one of the most successful outfits in UK rap this decade, vital in an industrial and an artistic sense. And here he is mocking the industry like he doesn't give a damn: "They say you wouldn't steal a television, like I'm stupid/I know a guy who will when I give him a few quid". Vivid descriptions of Runcorn council estate life, stories of smuggled ciggies and chipped Nokia phones and renting out Sky-ripped VHS movies at school play out over seven looped syllables of Paul McCartney emoting in the distance as if on a tenth generation dub. The track's brilliance is by no means atypical. Nevertheless in its wake the rest of the album is so much sweet gravy, like neat Vimto poured over an Everyday Value vanilla ice cream float.

## Spillage Village

### Bears Like This Too Much

Spillage Village DL

Though Dungeon Family comparisons are inevitable for any effervescent collective emerging from Atlanta with uncut funk oozing out their genes at full steam, Spillage Village make such notions incidental. Besides they easily score one higher than their forefathers through the lack of any player unctuous as Cee-Lo, an unfortunate J Cole hook on opener "Can't Call It" aside. Cole's detached cool is instructive as a stark contrast with the urgent hysterics of the group's Johnny Venus chewing over how he's "miseducated, unemployed" now his job's been sold overseas and Doctor Dot's call to arms "Grab the burner, let's use our rights/Let's get rid of these fools tonight". A similar hunger elevates bars such as JID's declaration on "Yellow Snow Freestyle" that he's "startin' a massacre, tryin' to be masculine" with glorious ambiguity. There's no telling if he's ironic or wilfully ignorant, much less any hint of sanctimony over which reading might be more positive. Doctor Dot ends one of his verses "Certified I could lead the new school/Word to Tribe, whole team is Zulu" – and neither claim seems far-fetched. □

Phil Freeman on ECM-ish almost-swing, interactive melodic bop, and a sax turn sounding like Autechre remixing Sunn O)))

## John Abercrombie Quartet

### Up And Coming

ECM CD/DL

This is the second ECM album by guitarist Abercrombie's new group with pianist Marc Copland, bassist Drew Gress and drummer Joey Baron, following 2014's *39 Steps*. Abercrombie and Gress, joined by drummer Billy Hart, previously backed Copland on two albums a decade apart – 1996's *Second Look* and 2008's *Another Place*. So there's an existing language being spoken here, one of liquid melodies harmonised upon by piano and guitar, as bass and drums accent but never attempt to hurry things along. Still, "Flipside" and the title track swing with surprising energy. The quartet's version of "Nardis" (by Miles Davis but popularised by Bill Evans) abandons the original's modal groove and sharp unison melody line in favour of a diffuse, vaporous approach that leaves notes floating in the air.

## Matt Brewer

### Unspoken

Criss Cross CD/DL

Bassist Matt Brewer is joined by tenor saxophonist Ben Wendel, guitarist Charles Altura, pianist Aaron Parks and drummer Tyshawn Sorey. Of the nine tracks, seven are Brewer originals; the group also essay versions of Bill Frisell's "Twenty Years" and Charlie Parker's "Cheryl". He's a self-effacing sort; you can tell because it's not until the fourth number "Lunar" that we get an unaccompanied bass intro, with Parks and Sorey gradually filling in behind him. This is an album of rubato, ECMish almost-swing, with every solo defined equally by skill and restraint, and the music swelling and receding in waves that never quite crest or break.

## Art Hirahara

### Central Line

Posi-Tone CD/DL

Pianist Art Hirahara's third album for Posi-Tone is his first in quartet format – he's joined by a crack team of New York modernists who spin his light-fingered compositions into shimmering gold: saxophonist Donny McCaslin, bassist Linda Oh and drummer Rudy Royston. Hirahara is a fleet, McCoy Tyner-ish player

who embraces his Japanese identity while dwelling comfortably within the 20th century acoustic jazz tradition. Royston's sharply cracking snare and forceful yet disciplined cymbal work and Oh's self-effacing touch on the bass provide an ideal foundation. McCaslin's solos are deceptively simple, focusing on emotional power rather than virtuosic technique. Along with 11 Hirahara originals, the album includes versions of Chico Buarque's "As Minhas Meninas" and two traditional songs: "Kuroda Bushi" and "Yuyake Koyake", the latter signalling the end of the school day for Japanese children.

## Hush Point

### III

Sunnyside CD/DL

Composed of trumpeter John McNeil, saxophonist Jeremy Udden, bassist Aryeh Kobrinsky and drummer Anthony Pinciotti, Hush Point play a highly interactive and subtle form of melodic bop that took its initial inspiration from clarinetist Jimmy Giuffrè's work, specifically "Iranic", which opened their self-titled debut. By limiting Pinciotti to brushes, they keep things simmering but never bland. On this album, McNeil and Udden harmonise like Inuit women singing into each other's mouths, as Kobrinsky and Pinciotti construct rhythms just perky enough to make a listener swivel in his or her seat. "It's A Pocketbook", which finds a middle ground between hoedown and New Orleans parade, is the disc's most energetic track, while the three-part suite in its second half is its most thoughtful and adventurous segment. But it's all good.

## Jon Irabagon/John Hegre/Nils Are Drønen

### Axis

Rune Grammofon CD/LP

Saxophonist Jon Irabagon (Dave Douglas Quintet, Mostly Other People Do The Killing) teams up with Jazkamer's guitarist John Hegre and drummer Nils Are Drønen for two extended pieces recorded live in Berlin and Fukuoka. In Berlin, he starts off playing slow, mantra-like phrases that begin to distort and come apart as they reach their endpoint. Behind him, Hegre's guitar slides and moans and Drønen's drums thump and rattle ominously. But at the piece's halfway mark Irabagon's horn starts squawking and sputtering, the guitar is almost riffing, and the drummer knocks the kit around in earnest. Eventually, it's full-on skronk fury. In Fukuoka, they're more patient, sticking to atmospheric for nearly 13 of 19 minutes. But the desired explosion arrives eventually.

## Jerome Jennings

### The Beast

Iola CD/DL

Drummer Jerome Jennings makes his debut as a leader with this self-released collection of fierce hard bop, unexpected R&B interpretations (transforming New Edition's "Cool It Now", its vocal harmonies reshaped into aria-like horn solos), and oddities like a tune based on an ice cream truck's jingle. The band include Sean Jones on trumpet and flugelhorn, trombonist Dion Tucker, tenor saxophonist Howard Wiley, pianist