



Bio information: **THUMBSCREW**

Title: **CONVALLARIA** (Cuneiform Rune 415) Format: CD / DIGITAL

RELEASE DATE: MAY 20, 2016

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FILE UNDER: JAZZ

Mary Halvorson, Michael Formanek, and Tomas Fujiwara
— the All-Star Collective Trio Thumbscrew —
Deliver a Startlingly Beautiful Second Album with *Convallaria*,
Featuring Music Cultivated During an Inspired Residency
at City of Asylum/Pittsburgh

"The barrage of riffs are both epic and melodic, the low end beefy and the percussion massive. Expect nothing less than magic from these three avant purveyors." –The Village Voice

Creative artists aren't subject to state persecution in the United States, but indifference can exact its own cost, just as generous support can pay steep dividends. *Convallaria*, the startlingly beautiful new Cuneiform album by the collective trio **Thumbscrew**, offers an all-too-rare case study in the power of underwritten sequestration.

Featuring veteran bass master **Michael Formanek**, protean guitarist **Mary Halvorson**, and indefatigably resourceful drummer **Tomas Fujiwara**, Thumbscrew spent two weeks honing the tunes on *Convallaria* at **City of Asylum**, an artist residency program in **Pittsburgh** originally launched as a refuge for writers in exile. In recent years City of Asylum has expanded its purview to include musicians, establishing the **BNY Mellon Jazz Residency** that in June/July 2015 hosted Thumbscrew. For Thumbscrew, the opportunity for intensive, undistracted collaboration yielded a particularly striking body of music, even by the standards of these prodigious players.

Already closely bonded by extensive collaborations in a variety of overlapping ensembles, the powerhouse triumvirate got to spend the kind of concentrated time together that's "almost unheard of these days," says Formanek. "I've done some composition residencies working on my own. But we were all there together, working on music every day, trying things out. I miss that from my younger days."

"It was amazing," agrees Halvorson. "Everyone's so busy. Even with my own band it can be like pulling teeth to get one rehearsal together. For two weeks we played every day and worked on all the new music. It really helped us to take the band to the next level."

Judging from the results, their time was well spent. Like Thumbscrew's 2014 eponymous Cuneiform debut, *Convallaria* is the work of a true collective with all three players contributing compositions and taking equal responsibility for shaping the music's flow. While exploring an array of improvisational spaces, the band has honed a sinewy sound marked by transparent textures and astringent rhythms. It's music that pushes outward and snaps back into unexpectedly altered forms.

The album opens with Halvorson's "**Cleome**," a deliberately paced, ominously pulsing piece that builds tension with almost perverse patience. She also wrote the closing piece, "**Inevitable**," a beatific ballad full of bent notes that bring to mind Hawaiian slack key playing (if Honolulu was annexed by Brooklyn). She also contributed the arpeggiated title track, which features some particularly luscious lines by Formanek. Like "**Cleome**," a genus of flower, "**Convallaria**" takes its name from a plant, "**the Lily of the Valley**," says Halvorson, "which is sweetly scented and highly poisonous, which I thought is a good description of Thumbscrew."

The knife's edge balance of beauty and danger suffuses the album. With Halvorson alternating between stinging single note runs and thick strummed chords, Fujiwara's stutter stepping "**Barn Fire Slum Brew**" opens up for a sunbeam melodic passage by Formanek in the middle, sliding through the ominous atmosphere. The bassist is out front on Fujiwara's "**The Cardinal and the Weathervane**," a three-section piece that "definitely benefitted from the process of how we rehearsed," Fujiwara says. "We played it every day for the two weeks, and kept refining it. I really like transitions that shift the perspective quickly."

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Fujiwara's suggestively clattery trap work kicks off Formanek's "**Samsonian Rhythms**," a concise and slyly grooving piece that generates terrific momentum without increasing volume or changing tempo. With its portentous, grinding atmosphere, "**Screaming Piha**" might be the last tune on the album one would guess was inspired by a birdcall, but the piece is loosely based on the loud and distinctive call of the titular South American fowl. If Formanek is responsible for the album's most forbidding tune, he also wrote the wackiest with "**Danse Insensé**," which feels like a vintage promenade until Fujiwara's cloppety rumba-esque solo. By the time the trio comes back in, we've visited Havana, vaudeville and indeterminate destinations in between, a journey that captures Thumbscrew's wit and WTF insouciance.

Part of what makes Thumbscrew such an extraordinary ensemble is that the trio has become one of the era's signature rhythm sections. They're the foundation for Formanek's **Ensemble Kolossus**, the hair-raising and ridiculously talent-laden large ensemble that recently released its debut recording, *The Distance*, on ECM. Formanek joined Halvorson on **Tomas Fujiwara and The Hook Up**'s third release, the critically hailed 2015 album *After All Is Said* (482 Music) with trumpeter **Jonathan Finlayson** and **Brian Settles** on tenor saxophone and flute. And Halvorson is in the midst of creating music for a new band featuring Fujiwara, Formanek, vocalist **Amirtha Kidambi**, and trumpeter **Ambrose Akinmusire**, a group "I really heard Thumbscrew for," Halvorson says. "It one of my favorite rhythm sections, the power and energy and everything we create together. At this point, all of us have used the rhythm section as leaders."

Halvorson and Fujiwara first started playing together in cornetist **Taylor Ho Bynum's Sextet**. Among other bands, they also work together in the collective quartets **Reverse Blue** (with **Chris Speed** and **Eivind Opsvik**) and **The Thirteenth Assembly** (with Bynum and violist **Jessica Pavone**), and **Mike Reed's** fascinating **Sun Ra**-inspired ensemble **Living By Lanterns**, which released the acclaimed 2012 Cuneiform album *New Myth/Old Science*. They also join forces on cellist **Tomeka Reid's** debut album *Tomeka Reid Quartet* (Thirsty Ear) and with clarinetist **Ben Goldberg** on *The Out Louds* (Relative Pitch Records), a collective trio featuring their live-wire connection in a free improv setting.

Raised in Boston and based in Brooklyn, **Mary Halvorson** spent three formative years at **Wesleyan University** studying and playing with visionary composer and saxophonist **Anthony Braxton**, eventually performing on six of his recordings. Since graduating from Wesleyan in 2002, she's become a ubiquitous presence in the circles where left-field jazz and improvised music intersect. Recognized as one of the most important and resourceful new voices on guitar to emerge in the past decade, she's a doggedly idiosyncratic artist who "can define the character of an entire band's tonal makeup without have to scream for attention," says S. Victor Aaron.

An invaluable collaborator, Halvorson has been sought out by bandleaders such as **Tim Berne**, **Curtis Hasselbring**, **Myra Melford**, **Jason Moran**, **Ches Smith**, **Joe Morris**, **Tom Rainey**, **Marc Ribot**, and **Trevor Dunn**. She's equally prolific as a bandleader in her own right. She's developed a body of music for solo guitar (documented on the 2015 Firehouse 12 album *Meltframe*), and leads a combustible trio with bassist **John Hebert** and drummer **Ches Smith**. Her muscular quintet adds trumpeter **Jonathan Finlayson** and alto saxophonist **Jon Irabagon** to the mix, and more recently Halvorson expanded the quintet to a septet with tenor saxophonist **Ingrid Laubrock** and trombonist **Jacob Garchik**, a group featured on her 2013 release *Illusionary Sea*.

Born and raised in Boston, MA, **Tomas Fujiwara** studied with legendary drummer and teacher **Alan Dawson** for eight years before moving to New York at the age of 17. The Brooklyn-based drummer and composer was recently described by Troy Collins in *Point of Departure* as "a ubiquitous presence in the New York scene...an artist whose urbane writing is equal to his impressively nuanced drumming."

Fujiwara is a key component in some of the most exciting music of the current generation, from his own bands **Tomas Fujiwara & The Hook Up** and **The Tomas Fujiwara Trio** (with **Ralph Alessi** and **Brandon Seabrook**) to his collaborative duo with Taylor Ho Bynum, and a diversity of creative sideman work with forward thinking peers like Matana Roberts, Tomeka Reid, **Nicole Mitchell**, **Mike Reed**, **Matt Bauder**, **Matt Mitchell**, **Amir ElSafar**, and **Josh Sinton's Steve Lacy-centric Ideal Bread**. He can also be found in revelatory projects with artists such as Anthony Braxton, **Ben Goldberg**, **Benoit Delbecq**, and **Briggen Krauss**.

Halvorson and Fujiwara connected with Formanek when he subbed in Bynum's band in 2011, and the chemistry was so readily apparent they immediately started looking into performance opportunities as a trio. Since then their paths have continued to intersect in various creatively fruitful endeavors.

One of jazz's definitive bassists since the 1980s, **Michael Formanek** has also made major contributions as a bandleader, composer and educator. Born in San Francisco, he first gained attention at 18 through his work with **Tony Williams Lifetime**, and spent much of the 1980s as a sideman with heavyweights such as **Freddie Hubbard**, **Joe Henderson**, **Stan Getz**, **Dave Liebman**, **Fred Hersch**, and **Attila Zoller**. He made his recording debut as a leader in 1990 with *Wide Open Spaces*, an acclaimed album featuring saxophonist **Greg Osby**, violinist **Mark Feldman**, guitarist **Wayne Krantz** and drummer **Jeff Hirshfield**.

He spent much of the 1990s in various collaborations with **Tim Berne**, first recording on the 1992 trio session with Hirshfield, *Loose Cannon*. Formanek toured and recorded widely with the Berne's band **Bloodcount**, while also leading his own septet with Berne, **Dave Douglas**, **Marty Ehrlich**, **Kuumba Frank Lacy**, **Marvin "Smitty" Smith** and **Salvatore Bonafede**. In addition to his work as a bandleader, Formanek has recorded prolifically as an accompanist on albums by **Jane Ira Bloom**, **Uri Caine**, **James Emery**, **Lee Konitz**, **Kevin Mahogany**, and the **Mingus Big Band**. Based in Baltimore since 2003, he is the director of the **Peabody Jazz Orchestra** and the jazz bass instructor at the prestigious **Peabody Conservatory of Music**. He continues to perform and collaborate with a dazzling array of improvisers, but there's no doubt that he's found a home base with Halvorson and Fujiwara, whether they're performing as Thumbscrew or some other ensemble.

“We’ve explored a lot of different music in these other projects,” Formanek says. “You get to a point where there’s a lot of familiarity, not with what’s going to happen but with possibilities and where we can push the envelope and do stuff we hadn’t done. *Convallaria* was such an opportunity to bring all those experiences into play. We’ve matured as a group. We’ve gotten to know each other much better, and I think that comes through in the music.”

Fertilized by the depth and diversity of various shared and independent collaborations, and nurtured by City of Asylum’s **BNY Mellon Jazz Residency**, a hothouse for musical creativity, in *Convallaria*, Thumbscrew’s creative synergy has come to full flower.

For more information on Thumbscrew:

Twitter: @ithumbscrew

www.thumbscrew.net - www.cuneiformrecords.com

www.MichaelFormanek.com - www.TomasFujiwara.com - www.MaryHalvorson.com

PROMOTIONAL PHOTOS

Digital [High-Resolution] versions of these images are available on the Thumbscrew artist page @ www.cuneiformrecords.com



WHAT THE PRESS HAS SAID ABOUT

THUMBSCREW

THUMBSCREW

CUNEIFORM

2014

“Pardon me while I gush. Mary Halvorson reminds me what there is to like about the guitar. No matter how pyrotechnical her playing gets...it never loses a sense of the palpable. ... Behind the motion and ideas, you detect a guitar and a physical presence. ... This trio offers a fabulous first course if you’re not already schooled in Halvorson. Completely democratic, both in terms of compositions and in playing, the threesome brings her together with bassist Michael Formanek and drummer Tomas Fujiwara, perfectly sympatico playmates. ... The interplay on Thumbscrew is super, and the tunes are subtly germinative. ...Halvorson..is on such a tear it’s hilarious. Out of the blue, at the end of the drummer’s cool “Nothing Doing,” the trio breaks into a prog-metal riff. The guitar muscles through nastily, but mostly Halvorson maintains a light, brilliant linearity... **4 ½ stars.**”

– John Corbett, “**The Hot Box,**” *Downbeat*, April 2014

“Of course they throw punches – any band with Formanek guiding it through the rocks is going to have a feisty side. But from Halvorson’s increasing poise to Fujiwara’s deep agility, even the rumble purrs now and again. **3 ½ stars**”

– Jim Macnie, “**The Hot Box,**” *Downbeat*, April 2014

“Guitarist Mary Halvorson’s sly, atonal skip and skronk is singular, but she’s a great team player, too, as these subtle conversations with deep-voiced bassist Formanek and fleet drummer Fujiwara make clear. ...behind the radio-static wheeps and pedal-steel-like glides lurks a quietly intense, lyrical player, especially on “Goddess Sparkle,” “Fluid Hills in Pink and Falling Too Far. **4 stars**”

– Paul de Barros, “**The Hot Box,**” *Downbeat*, April 2014

“Vibrates with a chilly, systematically unsystematic dedication to the tradition of anti-tradition. Halvorson ranges from spindly, fragile probes to heavy, free-form thrashing... Rhythm duo is surprisingly cohesive but hyperactive. Conclusions are properly inconclusive. Music for the margins. **2 ½ stars.**”

– John McDonough, “**The Hot Box,**” *Downbeat*, April 2014

“...this is a restless blend of visceral grooves, angular transitions, and unexpected flights. Those looking for something leaning more towards rock would turn to the short and thorny “Nothing Doing” and more exploratory “Buzzards’s Breath.” Which lays down a meaty 4/4/beat. ...Perhaps the best song here, “Fluid Hills in Pink,” is a dark formal melody carried on Formanek’s insistent bass. It all adds up to an excellent recording by a new trio that have already found their creative footing.”

– Editor’s Notes, *iTunes Preview*

“(12 O’Clock Track: ‘Cheap Knock Off,’ **Some appealingly knotty free jazz by Thumbscrew**)...”

... Halvorson and Fujiwara...feel like coleaders, masterfully colliding swing rhythms and melodic sophistication with carefully meted dissonance, surprise-laden structures, and potent doses of free time. ...Formanek...once again proves his muscle and versatility, providing the structural anchor while prodding and complementing his partners...” – Peter Margasak, *Chicago Reader*, Jan. 15 2014

“In listening to *Thumbscrew*...it’s easy to get sucked into listening to just one instrument at a time. On Fujiwara’s composition “Cheap Knock Off”, he’s poised to steal the show, but the song takes off when the trio merge midway in surprising but appropriate

manner, after which Halvorson's playing takes over. The disc, more focused on composition than you might think, supplies plenty of those moments. **The trio stays loose and improvisational, but tight to each other. ...their styles blend well.** There's even a touch of group humor. **...It's fun, smart, technically impressive... 8/10 stars"** -Justin Cober-Lake, *Popmatters*, Feb. 11, 2014

"Mary Halvorson (guitar), Michael Formanek (bass) and Tomas Fujiwara (drums) **play serious music but don't take themselves too seriously.** ... Even the group name is something of a sendup: Thumbscrew implies a more intense form of free improvisation that these three could easily deliver, yet...the music often relies on subtle interaction, lower volumes and expansive composition. **...Thumbscrew was created as a composer's forum, and the band takes each player in new directions.** ...Formanek's "Buzzard's Breath" is built on a traditional AABA structure that he skews with surprising choices in chords and harmonic detail. Everyone plays with abandon...Halvorson...use of electronic pitch-shifting has evolved from warped punctuation into a distinct aspect of how she shapes her thoughts." - Mike Shanley, *Jazz Times*, April 2014

"...Using odd, off balance fret board runs and a penchant for bending notes... Halvorson doesn't sound like anyone's complete impression of jazz, rock or noise. Which is precisely what makes her essential. **...Halvorson has released a number of bewitching albums...but she's never sounded so approachable as with the intimidatingly named Thumbscrew. Teamed with bassist Michael Formanek and drummer Tomas Fujiwara, Halvorson still has every bit of her signature, slippery drive, but the trio's powers combine for an album that retains a sharp yet still searching focus.** Rising out of a pointillist toe dance from Halvorson, 'Cheap Knock Off' builds to a chugging boil, her crisp tone careening into metallic drive as the rhythm section gamely swirls around her. Formanek, whose recent ECM albums have similarly balanced melody and controlled mayhem, anchors 'Fluid Hills in Pink' with a thick, ascending bass line... A steady march from Fujiwara in "Nothing Doing" carries the trio for a brief peek into Sonic Youth's backyard... **3.5/4 stars"** -Chris Barton, *Los Angeles Times*, June 16 2014

"4/5 Stars ...this spiky, bristling 2014 eponymous debut album reveals them to be ideal collaborators, contributing equally sans grandstanding yet still remaining unsurpassed as individual improvisers in the 21st century world of edgy avant jazz" - Dave Lynch, "All Music Staff Picks," *All Music*, January 21, 2014

"Made up of three highly distinctive voices in the world of jazz and avant-garde music, Thumbscrew should probably collapse under the weight of its own star power but Tomas Fujiwara (drums), Mary Halvorson (electric guitar) and Michael Formanek (acoustic bass) are just too aware of the potential of this supertrio to let that happen. ...Considerable talents are applied to the common good...no one overpowers the others. ...this should be a worthy pickup for any fan of improvised music. Just consider the source(s)." - S. Victor Aaron, "One Track Mind: Thumbscrew..."*Cheap Knock Off*," *Something Else!*, Jan.21,2014

"... Although freewheeling improvisational detours abound, the project is primarily composition driven...each work was specifically conceived for this lineup, instilling stylistic cohesiveness... **Despite mirroring the instrumentation of Halvorson's own trio, Thumbscrew explores similar thematic territory with a greater dynamic range** and a concerted focus on collective improvisation. A magnanimous collaborator, Halvorson's urbane compositions tend to favor the rhythm section's supple interactions in this intimate setting... **Balancing sophisticated writing with adroit improvisational interplay, Thumbscrew is a captivating document of the harmonious chemistry shared by three master musicians. Following in the footsteps of recent releases from vanguard artists like Living By Lanterns, Rob Mazurek and Jason Robinson, Cuneiform Records continues to issue some of the most compelling modern jazz of our time... 4/5 Stars"** - Troy Collins, *All About Jazz*, February 21 2014

"4.5/5 Stars. Kindred musical spirits unite on this composers' cooperative, featuring three musicians who have been forerunners and antagonists of new-fangled directions in the avant-garde jazz spectrum... **The trio often soars with vigorously enacted, linear unison lines and thronging clusters of sound.** They basically keep you on your toes via works that are symmetrically designed with structure and free-floating improv segments. ...during "Buzzard's Breath," Halvorson generates some high-heat by dishing out undulating harmonics and ascending thematic advances, tinged with distortion and bordering on a progressive-rock slant, propelled by Formanek's thumping bass... **Thumbscrew is uncannily cohesive, especially for a musical production that sneakily changes courses on an intermittent basis..."** - Glenn Astarita, *All About Jazz*, February 20, 2014

"If Cream and Nirvana had played instrumental jazz... they might have sounded like Thumbscrew. ...electric guitarist Mary Halvorson (just about every jazz critic's favorite new six string goddess), double bassist Michael Formanek, and drummer Tomas Fujiwara forge a sound that is both heavy and melodic, qualities shared by those iconic power trios. **In terms of jazz legacy, Thumbscrew obliquely bridges the guitar elegance of Jim Hall and the skronk of Marc Ribot, with Halvorson negotiating a tone on her hollow-body Guild that moves from fluid, ringing, and clean to brittle, bent, and blurry- and can't be mistaken for anyone else's.** ...nine original pieces, some of which feel like songs while others range more wildly like free improvisations. ...it's the taught rhythmic and harmonic interplay - as if the musicians are strapped tightly together in a roller coaster car - **that makes the album's 55 minutes unrelentingly gripping through passages both quiet and lilting and insanely fast and furious. 4/5 music, 3/5 sonics"** - Derk Richardson, *Absolute Sound*, April 2014

"...Expect...the sharp focus of skilled improvisers who happen to be fine composers as well. ...The composing is divvied up equally among...**Formanek, Halvorson, and Fujiwara.** The three artists forge a singular band identity on **Thumbscrew**, with no individual taking over the reins. ...

As the album progresses, **Halvorson** skips from clear single-note runs and advanced chord voicings to reverb-laden tremolo, gravelly distortion, and pitch-bending effects produced with her Line 6 delay pedal. The guitarist is central to **Thumbscrew's** sound, yet the

album's mix doesn't play favorites among the three equally present bandmembers -another clear indication of the group's collaborative bent - with Halvorson restraining her volume even when soloing, the decay of Fujiwara's prominent cymbals bleeding across his bandmates' angularities, and Formanek sliding effortlessly from melodic to anchoring roles, his bass timbre providing the album's largest measure of organic warmth. ... Fujiwara's "Nothing Doing," ... finds Halvorson and Formanek bursting into post-grunge-metal mode and the trio locking into a furious stop-on-a-dime unison finale. A pair of Formanek numbers -- and album highlights -- give Halvorson more chances to dirty up her sound... At moments like this, Peabody jazz faculty member **Formanek clearly displays his pleasure in rocking out off-campus -- particularly when musicians like Halvorson and Fujiwara can join him for the ride.**"

- Dave Lynch, *All Music*, www.allmusic.com

"...This sort of "avant-supergroup" recording happens frequently enough that the results need to be very interesting to garner significant attention. ...this trio's output meets that threshold. This...features writing credits split equally...their compositional approaches are so complimentary and integrated that there are no abrupt stylistic changes from track to track... While each participant is well-known for their improvisational skill, **Thumbscrew was meant to let their writing shine. And shine it does.** The opening track, Cheap Knock Off, features riffing from Formanek and Fujiwara. Then Halvorson joins in with a spiky, electric lead, progresses to strummed chords, followed by her trademark noisy aggression. **Fujiwara is so tight...I could listen to an album of just his drumming.** The more I listen to this offering, the more I like it. **A spirited release."**

-*Avant Music News*, January 17, 2014

"...This is a collaborative unit in every sense of the word. Compositions are equally divided... The artists also establish a group identity where no one represents the de facto head. Even the record's mix doesn't promote one musician over another. Halvorson's hollow-body, Guild electric guitar is reserved in volume, but not in imaginative resonance, so Formanek's acoustic double bass and Fujiwara's drum kit are matched in auditory dimensions. **This is forward-looking, contemporary instrumental music which nods to jazz, progressive rock, avant-garde and free jazz, but is beholden to no specific genre.** ...

...Thumbscrew illustrates a prolific interaction where creativity has no boundaries. If a listener wants... "outsider" music, which means music away from the norm, Thumbscrew is an inspired option. ...the Thumbscrew record also contains outstanding studio sound which highlights the trio's nuances as well as their raucous moments."

- Doug Simpson, *Audiophile Audition*, April 14, 2014

"AllMusic Best of 2014: Favorite Jazz Albums. Michael Formanek/Thomas Fujiwara/Mary Halvorson/Thumbscrew - Thumbscrew - 4/5 stars. Three top avant jazzers with decades of experience among them create a distinctive band identity on Thumbscrew's 2014 debut."

- *All Music*

"...trio Thumbscrew achieves a remarkable balance, its tightly knotted figures and puzzle-piece constructions remaining surprisingly lucid. The group is a leaderless collective...their transparent arrangements don't spotlight their respective authors-- instead the music's constantly shifting focus creates an ensemble aesthetic. Most of the improvisation is embedded within sturdy forms, alternately asymmetric and foursquare, and each player either deviates from the script...or closely follows notations that change from bar to bar. **Halvorson tends to stand out due to her electrified sound--her lyric, slaloming passages lurch between clean-toned liquidity and grimy coagulation--but Formanek and Fujiwara are equally active and inventive. Best of all, because the three of them respond to one another on the fly, they move and morph as a unit."**

-Peter Margasak, *The Chicago Reader*, September 2014

"Doing double duty as both band name and album title, Thumbscrew is also a clever metaphor for this particular power trio's personal playbook. **The music feels a bit like a 21st century descendant of Joe Morris' seminal Flip n' Spike (1992), at least on the surface, as the three players explore open, undulating grooves through a frequent tightening and loosening of their interplay along serpentine lines.** Guitarist Mary Halvorson was a student of Morris... but her method, on a huge Guild hollow body, remains singular. ... Bassist Michael Formanek and drummer Tomas Fujiwara bring strong personalities and skills sets... and a team mindset pervades ... "Still... Doesn't Swing" tips comedically...at an anticipated complaint towards the trio's music... Swing isn't the thing here. The aim instead is a less orthodox outcome reached by hanging adroit collective improvisation on sturdy thematic hooks. **...Halvorson's... trio sessions... seem to feature her best by combining space for fertile communication with comparatively lean contexts for detailed soloing. Thumbscrew fits that favorable bill** in both respects, boasting an excellent studio sound in the bargain."

- Derek Taylor, *Dusted in Exile*, February 21, 2014

"...since its release on the Cuneiform label...I have kept returning to the eponymous debut CD by Thumbscrew... It's a consistently great album, offering up music that collides warmly responsive interplay with infectiously kiltered grooves. The opening track, a Fujiwara head called "Cheap Knock Off," alludes texturally... to the early John Scofield trio with Steve Swallow and Adam Nussbaum, or, given the bell-like tone at times of Mary Halvorson's guitar, even to the Jim Hall trio of the mid 1970s with Terry Clarke and Don Thompson. **...it's...a music keenly aware of precedents and precursors but pushing forward along the leading edge of its own present tense.** What emerges sonically in these nine tracks is the trio's shared practice of bending and unfolding time; they co-create in each piece a motile amalgam of historicity and futurity, gesturing... at a rich set of musical antecedents from the jangling two-steps of Son House to the poly-intervallic melodies of Henry Threadgill, while simultaneously opening their improvised lines outward... Michael Formanek's big tone... what's remarkable is how he -- and how the whole trio -- manage to synch up with such metrical acuity (listen to those unisons) while driving so fiercely forward, right on top of the beat, meeting it head on, ahead. **Thumbscrew offers a music that moves, and that moves us along with them, listening: theirs is a remarkable and important record."**

- Kevin McNeilly, *Frank Styles*, February 18, 2014

"Guitarist Mary Halvorson has cred out there that is deserved. ... Mary joins up with bassist Michael Formanek and drummer Thomas Fujiwara to make a very potent combination. ... The album shows off all three... It also has a real group dynamic going on between the three. This is a goody. Any serious student of free music/out jazz and the modern guitarist, bassist and drummer should give this one a spin."

-Grego Applegate Edwards, *GappleGate Guitar and Bass Blog*, May 22, 2014

"...the trio **Thumbscrew** in their self-titled debut recording is simply amazing... The songs range from flowing and melodic to harsh and abrasive; 'Cheap Knock Off' is a funky tune with complex melody and rhythmic structure that flow over a groove that is as elusive as it is captivating. ... 'iThumbscrew'...is playful and bouncy and intricate and melodic in a way that reminds me of John Abercrombie's 'Gateway' trio of the mid-70s. But at the same time it is thoroughly modern, reflecting the styles of musicians who have grown up in the world of pop dominance and digital downloads... **I was surprised... the 9 song album is 55 minutes long... it just seems to fly by each time I listen, as I become absorbed in the music and the interplay between these excellent artists. ... Would I recommend? Absolutely!... This is ferocious and uncompromising music, but also completely fascinating and offers new insights with each listen.**"

- Michael Anderson, *Gear Diary*, January 21, 2014

"In *Thumbscrew*, Halvorson regularly shines, whether when peppering the air with flurries of bird-call-like *pizzicato* notes...leaning into moody low-end chords or allowing her guitar to dominate the sound space via open-string drones... **Her real talent, however, and the essential force of *Thumbscrew*, is in the way she breaks out of jazz conventions and delves subtly but effectively into new realms. When her notes become more forceful and her chords more robust, the music of *Thumbscrew* veers closely to the territory of rock, with echoes of *Larks Tongues In Aspic*-era King Crimson or the post-rock scene... Of course, the rhythm section plays a huge part in this dexterity.** Michael Formanek... slides down the neck of his upright bass combine with drops of guitar feedback from Halvorson to create a rambunctious haze of strings. During the album's best moments, **it's a heady cocktail.** Tomas Fujiwara is an exciting drummer whose drives bind the whole album together, providing the bedrock for Halvorson's thematic shifts. ... All three musicians have established improv credentials, so it's a bold step to try and explore a different facet.....**This album lays down some exciting foundations, and I can't wait to hear how they build on it...**"

- Joseph Burnett, *Dusted in Exile*, August 7, 2014

"Here are Lanny Fields' picks for the best albums of the year. ... *Thumbscrew* ... This album of free improv avant-garde jazz rocks with a heavy metal attitude. **Constantly shifting, this music is too cohesive to be fully improvised, yet too feral to be entirely composed.**"

- Lanny Fields, "The Best Albums of 2014," *Idea Stations*, December 10, 2014

"...This self-titled album is **full of angular music, with chopped rhythms and maddeningly rich harmony...** ...Ms. Halvorson is not the only star of the recording. So is Mr. Formanek... and then there is Mr. Fujiwara as well. There is a palpable metallic flavour to the music and much of this has to do with Ms. Halvorson channeling Jimi Hendrix via Sonny Sharrock. ...remarkable show stopping music... **A true revelation is Mr. Formanek's work as a composer. ... There is something infuriatingly new (in the nicest sense of the term) about this album. The jagged edges of the changes are reminiscent of Thelonious Monk and some of the bass-line melody delights in the same way that Herbie Nichols' music delights.** The mighty slather of dissonance heaped upon the tangled up and blue melody is a heady feast for the mind's ear. "Buzzard's Breath" delights in just such a manner. And while "Still... Doesn't Swing" drips with irony throughout, it does swing mightily. **It is music such as this that makes this band something to die for.** It is hoped that much more will come from the pens and the instruments of these musicians, be it alone or together."

- Raul da Gama, *Jazz Da Gama*, April 5, 2014

"Best Albums of 2014... **7. Thumbscrew**- self-titled (Cuneiform)" - Cisco Bradley, *Jazz Right Now*, February 25, 2014

"This is one of the albums we have all been waiting for. Appealing to fans of jazz, rock, and everything in between, this record is a stunning example of the sonic possibilities now being explored in one of New York's most vibrant music scenes. The musicians performing here have broken through all of the restrictive definitions that might be used to categorize such music and have gotten on to the task of **creating something profoundly new.** Pulsating with complex rhythmic interchanges, cutting guitar lines, and popping energy, this music tells a compelling story. **While a great deal of creative music today seems self-consciously abstract... Thumbscrew's music is joyously free.** ... Superb musicianship is coupled here with brilliant composition, bridging written and improvised sections seamlessly. I previously referred to **Thumbscrew's sound as "new energy music."** The crackle of energy that builds in each song is of a rare variety. ...

Thumbscrew's self-titled album is a monumental achievement by one of New York's most exciting bands. This is creative music at its finest."

- Francis Bradley, *Jazz Right Now*, December 8, 2014

"**Thumbscrew... deliver provocative, yet not off-putting new jazz.** ... Throughout, Halvorson's more abstract approach to her instrument finds grounding in Formanek's rich bass and Fujiwara's often danceable polyrhythms. Overall, the album's approach might be summed up by the tongue-in-cheek name of Formanek's piece "Still ... Doesn't Swing," although it frequently does despite itself."

- Martin Z. Kasdan Jr., *Leo Weekly*, March 28, 2014

"THE BEST MUSIC OF 2014: The 2014 NPR Music Jazz Critics Poll: The Rest Of The Top 50
21. Mary Halvorson/Michael Formanek/Tomas Fujiwara, Thumbscrew (Cuneiform) 63.5 (14)

- Francis Davis, *A Blog Supreme (From NPR Jazz)*, December 19 2014

"Impressive albums from Thumbscrew and The Frank Kimbrough Quartet show the strength of recent American jazz albums. Best of the bunch for me was the eponymous album from the trio Thumbscrew. Guitarist Mary Halvorson, bassist

Michael Formanek and drummer Tomas Fujiwara rarely raise their voices, musically speaking, but the interplay fairly crackles with energy. There's a sly wit about the way they gesture towards familiar things, in an overall context of avant-garde fluidity where absolutely anything may happen.. ..."
- Ivan Hewett, *The Telegraph*, Oct. 7, 2014

"Royalty of Brooklyn's avant-garde jazz scene--slaytastic guitarist Mary Halvorson and octopi-armed drummer Tomas Fujiwara--have melded their extraordinary talents together before in myriad groups, but it is in Thumbscrew where the radical twosome may have reached their apex. A collaborative, composition-based fire-breathing trio rounded out by imposing bassist colossus Michael Formanek, Halvorson... wields and shoots off salvo after salvo from her punk-jazzified six-string like a woman possessed. On its eponymous debut *Thumbscrew* (Cuneiform), the barrage of riffs are both epic and melodic, the low end beefy and the percussion massive. **Expect nothing less than magic from these three avant purveyors."**

- Brad Cohan, *The Village Voice*, March 19, 2014

"...Thumbscrew is modern jazz at its heretical best. The writing is intelligent and playful, the group chemistry fresh but assured. It's heretical in the strict sense of being about choices. **There isn't a moment on the record that couldn't go in half a dozen other directions, but they also seem to pick the most interesting and exciting one.** It's remarkable...how quickly Mary Halvorson's twangy, cello-turned-lengthwise guitar sound has become one of the familiar signatures of contemporary improvisation.... It was a sound that seemed to come out of Charlie Christian, Django Reinhardt, Chet Atkins and Derek Bailey with sufficient confidence to embrace that whole (non-)tradition and still have enough energy to turn it all on its head.... Halvorson's puckish presence and ability to skate between clear, almost diatonic patterns and hardscrabble abstraction, is nicely balanced in the group by Michael Formanek's seniority and sheer presence. He's the Grand Inquisitor here, interrogating every situation with calm rigor. ...drummer Tomas Fujiwara. ...Tomas's real skill is in generating a strong implicit pulse but playing on its fringes and making only occasional reference to it. He's uncountable in some passages here, not over-busy or dominant or distracting, but certainly not an orthodox caller of cadence. **Nine tracks, three apiece. Not a clunker or merely routine line among them... this release confirms the label's dogged commitment to the best in contemporary music as well. It's a triumph as much for the imprint as for the group."**

- Brian Morton, *Point of Departure*, March 2015

"...There are moments of genius (like the crippled flamenco moves that surface in iThumbscrew, the suspended guitar solo in the middle of Still Doesn't Swing, the syncopated and catchy theme of Line To Create)...

Highlights are the funereal pow-wow dance that opens Fluid Hills In Pink, only to drown in Halvorson's extended intellectual doodling, and the brainy post-rock alienation of Buzzard's Breath."

- Piero Scaruffi, *Scaruffi.com*

"...This is kind of like a kinder, gentler Eugene Chadbourne. Mary Halvorson plays...keeping a clean and concise line about her playing, and deeply empathizing with her erstwhile band mates... Using minimal instrumentation, just bass, drums and guitar, the bandmates move all over the stylistic world. Most pieces... work in what seems minor key and off-tempo and odd time signatures. Halvorson's guitar skitters along, moving with impeccable logic. **What I find the most intriguing is simply the interplay among the master musicians here. Cuneiform has been releasing high-quality music for some time, and this is another great one from them. It is abstract, cerebral and moving... 4/4 Stars"**

- Dana Lawrence, *Sea of Tranquility*, February 11, 2014

"Thumbscrew is a lesson in control and understatement... guitarist Mary Halvorson, bassist Michael Formanek, and drummer Tomas Fujiwara manage to stir up a sort of controlled ruckus. **The music ebbs and flows in different states of tension, seemingly built on loose compositions with healthy interjections of freedom. ...the group never lose sight of the song.** Even when things get rocking...**there is an underlying restraint** employed. ...

Halvorson's tremendous technique shines throughout *Thumbscrew*. Her control is magnificent as her band mates intuitively tumble around beneath her playing. **This record is a must for fans of modern guitar explorations and serves as a taut symposium in group interplay, offering surprises at every turn."**

- Matt Schulz, *The Squids Ear*, March 10, 2015

"...One factor that distinguishes this trio was the mutual decision to write specifically for this lineup instead...of recasting previously composed material. Fujiwara's ...*Cheap Knock Off* immediately shows off the benefits of that approach with its air of apparent freedom for improvisation inside what the composer terms "a number of forms, and there's no part where it's completely free."

...The beauty of the band's "we're all in this together" aesthetic pervades the title track, written by Formanek, as does his triumphant, rip-snorting Buzzard's Breath. Who's soloing? Who's accompanying? Who cares, when the results are so thoroughly engrossing and inspired... ..one of the many pleasures of spending time with Thumbscrew is the way they interact... They make every second count, and their music sounds better and better the deeper you get into it. Seriously recommended."

- Stuart Kremsky, *Mr. Stu's Record Room*, October 2014

"Thumbscrew, make for an assured ensemble on their self titled debut. The group displays their sense of humor and deft touch to "Fluid Hills of Pink", with Formanek again raising the bar with improvs both genuine and slapstick. The album peaks with "Buzzard's Breath", a track that, despite its unorthodox heads, grooves well thanks to Fujiwara and Halvorson's synchronicity. While Halvorson remains an imminent force in the world of jazz guitar, Fujiwara and Formanek play far more than a supporting role in Thumbscrew and their eponymous debut is all the better for it."

- Randy Reynolds, *The Big Takeover*, February 19, 2014

"...One of the things that makes Thumbscrew's approach so appealing is that the conventional separation between lead soloist and rhythm section collapses and is replaced by a more democratic concept that gives equal weight to each contributor. Yes, the guitar is inarguably the primary melodic force, but the fluid interaction between the three musicians turns that detail into

a less determining factor... The distance between soloist and accompanist disappears, and Thumbscrew also manages to find that elusive sweet spot between formal structure and improvisation. ... **The trio format is ideal for enabling the contributions of all three musicians to be heard with the utmost clarity.** Yet while all three often play throughout a given piece, there are times... when one steps aside to give the others even more room.

'Still...Doesn't Swing' includes a mid-song spotlight for the guitarist... She's a marvel throughout (check out her unhinged freewheeling on "Buzzard's Breath" as another example), but so too are Formanek and Fujiwara. That each stands out is clearly a testament to the project's "One for all, all for one" spirit." - *Textura*, April 2014

"2014: favorites – finishing touches

Albums:... #68: Mary Halvorson, Michael Formanek, Thomas Fujiwara: *Thumbscrew* (Cuneiform Records)" - *Perfect Sounds*

"...On first listen, Thumbscrew sounds just like what you'd expect of a trio with this lineup. Mary Halvorson obtains a clean, rounded sound from her big, hollow-bodied electric guitar that...sounds more like Jim Hall and Wes Montgomery than Hendrix... Fujiwara...swings buoyantly, and Formanek, has a big, woody sound and timing as natural as breathing.

But their interactions aren't generic at all. In the sort of straightahead jazz that Thumbscrew superficially resembles, there tends to be a clear distinction between the figure in front – usually a soloist – and the field... But **this trio...uses the apparent foreground to draw attention to a whole in which it is not necessarily the dominant part.** ...what Thumbscrew is doing here. It is neither hierarchical, the way a soloist with accompaniment is, nor anti-hierarchical, the way free improv can be. The balance of governance and acquiescence is in constant flux, governed by a jointly shared sense of responsibility engendered by trust. Because the line-up is so sparse, that mutuality is on clear display.

But the sparseness also facilitates close listening to each player. Formanek brings not only a great tone, but a team attitude. ...on Halvorson's "Line to Madness"...he simultaneously expresses one melody, provides Halvorson springboards to launch forays of her own, and matches pauses and decelerations with Fujiwara. Here and elsewhere, **Fujiwara uses modulations in the density of his cymbal play and tattoos on the sides of his drums to contract a fractal framework around the string players.** ...

Halvorson's playing is much more exposed than in the elaborately arranged pieces she devises for her own group, or...more extroverted trios... She's as committed to Thumbscrew's collective aesthetic as her partners, but **given the brighter tone of her instrument, her exactly placed single notes and well-defined chords are what you hear first.** ...

Like Fujiwara, she is a master of unassuming transition... But her changes are often counterintuitive. On Formanek's "Still...Doesn't Swing"...she rolls off the reverb and snaps the strings with a dry agitated attack, the sort of thing Derek Bailey used... It's a startling moment...it encapsulates **the refusal to meet expectations, and the ability to make the wrong seem right so quickly that you don't notice it, that makes Halvorson so great.**" - Bill Meyer, *The Wire*, March 2014

"Graded on a Curve: The Best of 2014's New Releases, Part Two ... 5. Mary Halvorson, Michael Formanek, Tomas Fujiwara, *Thumbscrew* ...Bluntly, these are heavyweight players... Thumbscrew is not a guitar trio, though Halvorson does shred early and often. As said **Thumbscrew is a unit of equality and their communicative sparks can be startling;** Formanek and Fujiwara are constantly throwing ideas into the fray with nary a rhythm section trope in the duration. And a few of the track titles make me smile, particularly "Goddess Sparkle," ... and "Still...Doesn't Swing," a nutshell encapsulation of the resistance creative musicians of this caliber routinely contend with, malarkey that doesn't seem to be keeping them down."

-Joseph Neff, *The Vinyl District*, December 19, 2014

"This trio...is a real treat. ...the trio format gives the guitarist's unusual chord voicing and intervallic leaps a big space to fill up. The group is tight, and as far out as they may go, they lock together tightly and deliver some exceptional music.

The opener "Cheap Knock Off" sets the stage with a lyrical opening passage and within five minutes, builds to a full throated roar. Fujiwara and Formanek create a strong foundation upon which the Halvorson builds a structure, and then proceeds to burn it down.... **Thumbscrew is a great trio, highly listenable and lyrical, but does not shy away from the tough stuff.... 4 Stars"**

- Paul Acquaro, *The Free Jazz Collective*, March 18, 2014

CONCERTS

"When it comes to writing reviews of musical performances, it would be pretty amateurish to simply say that "it was awesome!"... But that is certainly my knee-jerk and most-to-the-point reaction to shows like the one I experienced last night... Simply put, **Thumbscrew was incredible.** ...two hour performance...was the culmination of a two-week residency hosted by City of Asylum. ... The trio kicked things off by playing...from their self-titled debut recording and then transitioned into **all new material...this created a real in-the-moment type of vibe, where the material was not only new to the audience but also for the musicians themselves.** Overall, the music seemed really collaborative... One thing about jazz performances that I don't always LOVE are the solos...the traditional formulaic routine where all of the musicians each take a turn... **I really like when a trio like Thumbscrew can work in a solo here and there without losing the group dynamic. It's also nice when the solos are unexpected...**placed...so the listener might not see them coming...

In summary, this was a really great evening of music. Everything felt fresh and alive. The audience seemed very receptive and appreciative. The weather was great. And it was free. ...City of Asylum said that this was their first jazz residency so I assume it **won't be their last."** - JP, "Thumbscrew -7.5.15- Alphabet City Tent, Pittsburgh, PA" *Jazz Orbits*, July 6, 2015