

Bio information: **THUMBSCREW**
Title: **NEVER IS ENOUGH** (Cuneiform Rune 478)
Format: CD / VINYL (DOUBLE) / DIGITAL
www.cuneiformrecords.com
FILE UNDER: **JAZZ**

**How much is too much when it comes to THUMBSCREW?
The All-Star Collective Trio Delivers a Decisive Answer with Their Sixth Album
NEVER IS ENOUGH
a Riveting Program of Originals by Tomas Fujiwara, Mary Halvorson and Michael Formanek**

A funny thing happened while Thumbscrew was hunkered down at City of Asylum, the Pittsburgh arts organization that has served as a creative hotbed for the collective trio via a series of residencies. Late in the summer of 2019 the immediate plan was for **drummer Tomas Fujiwara, guitarist Mary Halvorson and bassist Michael Formanek** to rehearse and record a disparate program of Anthony Braxton compositions they'd gleaned from his Tri-Centric Foundation archives, pieces released last year on *The Anthony Braxton Project*, a Cuneiform album celebrating his 75th birthday. At the same time, the triumvirate brought in a batch of original compositions that they also spent time refining and recording, resulting in *Never Is Enough*, a brilliant program of originals slated for release on Cuneiform.

There's a precedent for twined projects by the trio serving as fascinating foils for each other. In June 2018, Cuneiform simultaneously released an album of Thumbscrew originals, *Ours*, and *Theirs*, a disparate but cohesive session exploring music by the likes of Brazilian choro master Jacob do Bandolim, pianist Herbie Nichols, and Argentine tango master Julio de Caro. Those albums were also honed and recorded during a City of Asylum residency. While not intended as the same kind of dialogue, *The Anthony Braxton Project* and *Never Is Enough* do seem to speak eloquently (if cryptically) to each other.

"Braxton's presence was very strong in this period, spending time with his music, reading some of the composition notes" Formanek says. "I think and hope the influence was there. It was definitely in our minds. I don't know if there's a direct influence, but definitely inspiration."

Each member contributed three pieces to the project, and the album opens with Fujiwara's amiable "Camp Easy," a gently loping piece that starts with a pastoral improvised passage that anticipates the spacious counterpoint between Formanek's thoughtfully surefooted bass and Halvorson's slippery lines. Fujiwara's "Through an Open Window" features a very different kind of movement, with episodic motifs that fit together like a jigsaw puzzle. Inspired by a hotel view in Sarajevo, the piece suggests a layered panorama, "a cityscape skyline, rain falling, mountains, a lot of visual inspiration with people, clouds, and cars subtly moving and shifting," Fujiwara says.

With a rock 'n' roll edge, Halvorson's "Sequel to Sadness" maintains the coiled energy of a panther stalking prey, with strategic pauses and a centerpiece drum solo that builds delicious tension. She also contributes the album's most unabashed ballad, a supplely lyrical tune inspired by standards she's been working on. And Fractured Sanity expands from a telegraphic guitar riff into quicksilver conversation with all three players offering agitated commentary.

Formanek's title track introduces a whole new array of shades to Thumbscrew's already brimming palette. After decades of almost entirely avoiding the instrument on recordings, he created a squally, atmospheric piece that gives him plenty of space for his non-idiomatic electric bass work. "I conceived 'Never Is Enough' as a piece I was going to record on the electric bass, but could play on either one," he says. The ambiguous title riffs on a classic New Yorker cartoon ("How about never — is never good for you?") but speaks more to "the ever present feeling of being held captive by the insanity of the last four years of...whatever this has been."

Opening with a brief lockstep theme, Formanek's "Emojis Have Consequences" gives each player a distinct part, with their evolving two-against-one interactions weaving a quietly volatile matrix. The album's closer, "Scam Likely," is another palette-expanding by Formanek, with a long abstract duo passage featuring his ambient, electronically altered and synthesized electric bass calls set against Fujiwara's beautifully textured trap work. Halvorson's arrival adds pulsars and star-bursts to the celestial soundscape, which coalesces like a galaxy being born. Which makes sense considering the music took shape in the midst of Thumbscrew's deep dive into Braxton's vast and varied oeuvre.

"We weren't separating them out when we were rehearsing and recording," Halvorson says. "It was just going through this music, and one tune might be Braxton, and one might be an original. The thing I get from both is an intense sense of focus."

The focus each player brings to Thumbscrew and the dense web of experience they share is part of what makes the ensemble so extraordinary. Beyond their work as a trio they're the foundation for Formanek's Ensemble Kolossus, the hair-raising and ridiculously talent-laden large ensemble that released its 2016 debut on ECM *The Distance*. Formanek joined Halvorson on Tomas Fujiwara & The Hook Up's third release, the critically hailed 2015 album *After All Is Said* (482 Music). And Halvorson's Thumbscrew bandmates are the foundation of her song-based band Code Girl. For Halvorson, Thumbscrew has become an invaluable creative foundation. "It's

one of my favorite rhythm sections to be a part of, the power and energy and everything we create together,” she says. “At this point, all of us have used this 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 Halvorson’s Reverse Blue (with Chris Speed and Eivind Opsvik), the collective Illegal Crowns (with Bynum and Benoît Delbecq), and Mike Reed’s fascinating Sun Ra-inspired ensemble Living By Lanterns, which released the acclaimed 2012 Cuneiform album *Old Myth, New 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. More recently, Halvorson joined Bynum, Gerald Cleaver, Brandon Seabrook and Ralph Alessi on Fujiwara’s acclaimed 2017 album *Triple Double* (Firehouse 12 Records).

Based in Brooklyn, Fujiwara has also earned renown as a composer and bandleader who performs and records with some of the most exciting musicians of the current generation. He’s been described by *Point of Departure* as “a ubiquitous presence in the New York scene...an artist whose urbane writing is equal to his impressively nuanced drumming.” One of his primary vehicles for the past decade has been Tomas Fujiwara & The Hook Up, which debuted on 2010’s *Actionspeak* (482 Music) with Halvorson, Jonathan Finlayson, Brian Settles, and Danton Boller. Aside from Trevor Dunn and Formanek taking over from Boller on bass on 2012’s *The Air Is Different* and 2015’s *After All Is Said*, respectively, the quintet has featured the same players on the subsequent 482 Music albums.

Other notable ensembles include 7 Poets Trio with Tomeka Reid and Patricia Brennan, documented on 2019’s eponymous RogueArt release, and his collaborative duo with cornetist Taylor Ho Bynum, captured on 2007’s *True Events* (482 Music), 2010’s *Stepwise* (NotTwo) and 2014’s self-released *Through Foundation*. Known for the diversity of his creative work, he’s also performed with leading improvisers and composers such as John Zorn, Matana Roberts, Joe Morris, Nicole Mitchell, Amir ElSaffar, and Benoît Delbecq, among many others. The New York Times described him as a drummer who “works with rhythm as a pliable substance, solid but ever shifting. His style is forward-driving but rarely blunt or aggressive, and never random. He has a way of spreading out the center of a pulse while setting up a rigorous scaffolding of restraint...A conception of the drum set as a full-canvas instrument, almost orchestral in its scope.”

Also based in Brooklyn, Halvorson has been described by *JazzTimes* as “a singular talent,” and by the *Wall Street Journal* as “one of the most exciting and original guitarists in jazz—or otherwise.” In recent *Downbeat*’s Critics Polls Halvorson has been celebrated as guitarist, rising star jazz artist, and rising star composer of the year, and in 2019 she was awarded a MacArthur Fellowship. One of New York City’s most in-demand guitarists, over the past decade Halvorson has worked with such diverse musicians as Tim Berne, Taylor Ho Bynum, John Dieterich, Trevor Dunn, Bill Frisell, Ingrid Laubrock, Jason Moran, Joe Morris, Tom Rainey, Jessica Pavone, Tomeka Reid, Marc Ribot and John Zorn.

Halvorson has released a series of critically acclaimed albums on the Firehouse 12 label, from 2008’s *Dragon’s Head*, her trio debut featuring bassist John Hébert and drummer Ches Smith. The group expanded to a quintet with trumpeter Jonathan Finlayson and alto saxophonist Jon Irabagon on 2010’s *Saturn Sings* and 2012’s *Bending Bridges*, a septet with tenor saxophonist Ingrid Laubrock and trombonist Jacob Garchik on 2014’s *Illusionary Sea*, and finally an octet with pedal steel guitarist Susan Alcorn on 2016’s *Away With You*. She also released the 2015 solo recording *Meltframe*, and most recently the second Code Girl release, 2020’s *Artlessly Falling* (Firehouse 12 Records) with trumpeter Adam O’Farrill, saxophonist/vocalist Maria Grand, and vocalist Amirtha Kidambi (singing Halvorson’s lyrics).

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. He’s been described as “a bold and unclassifiable bassist and composer,” while *The New York Times* has noted that his music is always “graceful in its subversions, often even sumptuous.” Whether it’s for a small band or a large ensemble, he creates modern jazz that is earthy yet atmospheric, always alive with dark-hued melody and bone-deep rhythms, rich in dynamic possibility and the sound of surprise. Even with decades of experience to his credit – he got his start as a Bay Area teenager playing with the likes of Joe Henderson and Tony Williams – Formanek has made some of his keenest creative leaps in recent years, documented on a sequence of justly lauded recordings.

His three ECM albums as a leader each scored rare five-star reviews in *DownBeat*. These included two discs – *Small Places* (2012) and *The Rub and Spare Change* (2010) – featuring a powerhouse quartet with saxophonist Tim Berne, pianist Craig Taborn and drummer Gerald Cleaver; the third was a magnificent record – *The Distance* (2016) – that showcased his compositions for an all-star big band, playfully dubbed Ensemble Kolossus. Formanek’s first album for the Intakt label, *Time Like This* (2018), saw him leading his new Elusion Quartet with saxophonist Tony Malaby, pianist Kris Davis and drummer Ches Smith to “soul-stirring” effect, according to *All About Jazz*. Formanek’s latest release is *Even Better*, which presents for the first time his Very Practical Trio, featuring Halvorson and altoist Tim Berne.

Born in San Francisco in 1958, Formanek has performed in myriad contexts over the decades, including with masters from Gerry Mulligan and Stan Getz to Freddie Hubbard and Fred Hersch. Among his peers, the bassist has collaborated closely with Tim Berne, making a duo album with the saxophonist (*Ornery People*) and performing extensively in Berne’s iconic Bloodcount band in the ’90s. Formanek also released a solo LP – *Am I Bothering You?* – via Berne’s Screwgun label in 1998. Formanek’s early recordings as a leader included a string of quartet and septet releases for Enja from 1990 to 1996. As a sideman, he has recorded with Uri Caine, Dave Burrell, Jane Ira Bloom, Gary Thomas, Jack Walrath, Harold Danko, Lee Konitz, Freddie Redd, Art Pepper, Chet Baker and even Elvis Costello, along with appearing on albums by such frequent partners as Halvorson and Fujiwara, Berne, Malaby, multi-reedist Marty Ehrlich, trumpeter Dave Ballou, saxophonist Ellery Eskelin, drummer Devin Gray and pianist Angelica Sanchez. From 2001 to

2018, Formanek taught jazz bass and jazz history at the Peabody Institute of Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, where he also directed the Peabody Jazz Orchestra. He continues to teach at the School for Improvisational Music in New York, along with conducting workshops and masterclasses internationally.

For more information on Thumbscrew

Twitter: @ithumbscrew

www.thumbscrew.net - www.cuneiformrecords.com

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

PROMOTIONAL PHOTO [Please credit photographer: **Brian Cohen** | Digital images available on Cuneiform's Thumbscrew page.]

