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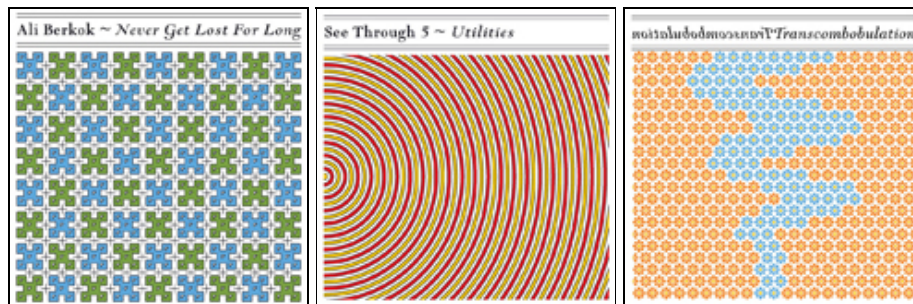
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Transcombobulation

**Ali Berkok: *Never Get Lost for Long***

All-Set!

**See Through 5: *Utilities***

All-Set!

**Transcombobulation: *Transcombobulation***

All-Set!

“To be listened to in the spirit in which it was made.” The line appears on the inner sleeve of Transcombobulation's self-titled debut but could function as the guiding ethos of the nascent All-Set! Editions imprint. Midwifed into being by Toronto musician Mike Smith, the label's a welcome addition to the experimental scene and promises to be a valuable conduit for all manner of left-field sounds and projects. Certainly the range encompassed by its first three releases bodes well, with Ali Berkok's solo pianisms, See Through 5's prog-funk fusion, and Transcombobulation's playful synthesizer etudes all inhabiting different places within the progressive music firmament.

Three of See Through 5's members—bassist Pete Johnston, saxophonist Karen Ng, and pianist Tania Gill—previously appeared in textura's pages when a review of See Through Trio's *Parallel Lights* (Woods and Waters) materialized in late 2014. Johnston also leads the now-expanded group, which augments the original three with Smith (synth, programming) and Jake Oelrichs (drums, glockenspiel). That See Through 5 is described as a chamber-prog group in the accompanying literature makes sense, especially when it would be misguided to categorize the debut album as jazz. Further to that, the six pieces (all composed by Johnston) on the thirty-eight-minute *Utilities* largely eschew improvisation in favour of through-composition, a move that aligns See Through 5 to prog, post-rock, and krautrock genres. In a typical album track, Johnston and Oelrichs lay down a solid pulse alongside of which Ng, Gill, and Smith engage in complex interchanges with geometric precision.

Replace Ng's saxophone with Jeff Parker's guitar playing and the motorik “Something Somebody Can Use” wouldn't sound out of place on an early Tortoise album. The intricate jazz-funk workout “Standing in the Dust Since Then,” by comparison, doesn't sound all that far removed from a Steve Coleman and Five Elements track, especially when Johnston powers Ng's saxophone with string bass playing. There are also moments when comparisons to The Lounge Lizards wouldn't be out of order; when the saxophone and synthesizer indulge in a complex spiral during “Because Time Is For Living,” the result calls to mind similar interplay between John Lurie and Roy Nathanson in that early NY-based outfit. As mentioned, soloing is downplayed in favour of through-composition, but a few individual spotlights do arise, a brief piano solo by Gill during “Not Even The Masons Know” and Coleman-esque turn by Ng in “We Have Both Been Dissected,” to cite two examples, and Smith's interventions add much to the recording in moving the music away from a purely acoustic realm into something spacier and more prog-like.

A mainstay of Toronto's jazz scene, Ali Berkok would appear to be somewhat of a thinking man's pianist, judging from the analytical sensibility he brings to *Never Get Lost For Long*, a fourteen-track, hour-long solo set of originals and covers. One hint as to the mindset underscoring his approach is seen in the title of the spidery “Lennie,” the reference presumably to Lennie Tristano,

an analytical player in his own right. Though *Never Get Lost For Long* is his first solo recording, Berkok brings ample group experience to the recording, with stints in the jazz outfit Arkana Music, post-rock minimalism project Muskox, and improvising quartet Aurochs preceding the solo endeavour.

The freeform maneuvers performed throughout the opening “Landing” earmark Berkok as someone with an adventurous appetite and the technical means by which to indulge it. Indicative of his bold approach is his rendering of Irving Berlin's breezy “Cheek to Cheek,” in which the song's familiar melodies are refracted through the pianist's oblique re-shaping; rarely have such dark shadows been draped across Berlin's song, but the effect isn't unwelcome, especially when a muscular, low-register propulsion gives the treatment momentum. Similarly oblique is the version of “Giant Steps,” with the well-known melodic trajectories of Coltrane's classic stretched by Berkok into even more abstract form.

Though not everything is handled straightforwardly, the character of some of Berkok's own pieces is intimated by titles such as “Arrhythmia,” “Blues,” and “Propulsion,” and his preoccupation with rhythm surfaces repeatedly; he even works a bit of R&B into the programme by way of “The Wolf” and reveals a delicate side in the restrained, almost Monk-like cover of “Everything Happens to Me.” While *Never Get Lost For Long* doesn't see him re-inventing the solo piano tradition, it's certainly a credible addition to it, especially when his interests in free improv and song form are both well-served by the collection.

One would have to be a special brand of curmudgeon not to be charmed by *Transcombobulation*, a playful half-hour set of synthesizer reveries courtesy of Smith (Moog Little Phatty, Moog Rogue, Yamaha MR-10) and Jonathan Adjemian (Korg MS-20). It's a dramatically different recording than the other two, and based on the evidence at hand, Smith and Adjemian would seem to have a particular affection for the days when synthesizer noodlings first began appearing on records. The two typically ground the tracks' melodic warble with simple shuffle beats generated by an old drum computer, a firm foundation that frees them to toss healthy dollops of synth squibble back and forth. Wafting through the air like a gentle, warm breeze, the six pieces, all of them composed by Smith and recorded on a single day in November 2014, amount to some trippy potpourri of prog, sci-fi soundtracks, jazz-funk, and early computer experimentation, none of it meant to be taken too seriously. It's not a one-note affair either, as each track offers a slightly different riff on the general theme—compare, for example, the soothing fourth and sixth to the proto-funk of the fifth, which could pass for a Herbie Hancock outtake from *Thrust*. That aforementioned “To be listened to in the spirit in which it was made” feels especially applicable in this case.

April 2016