

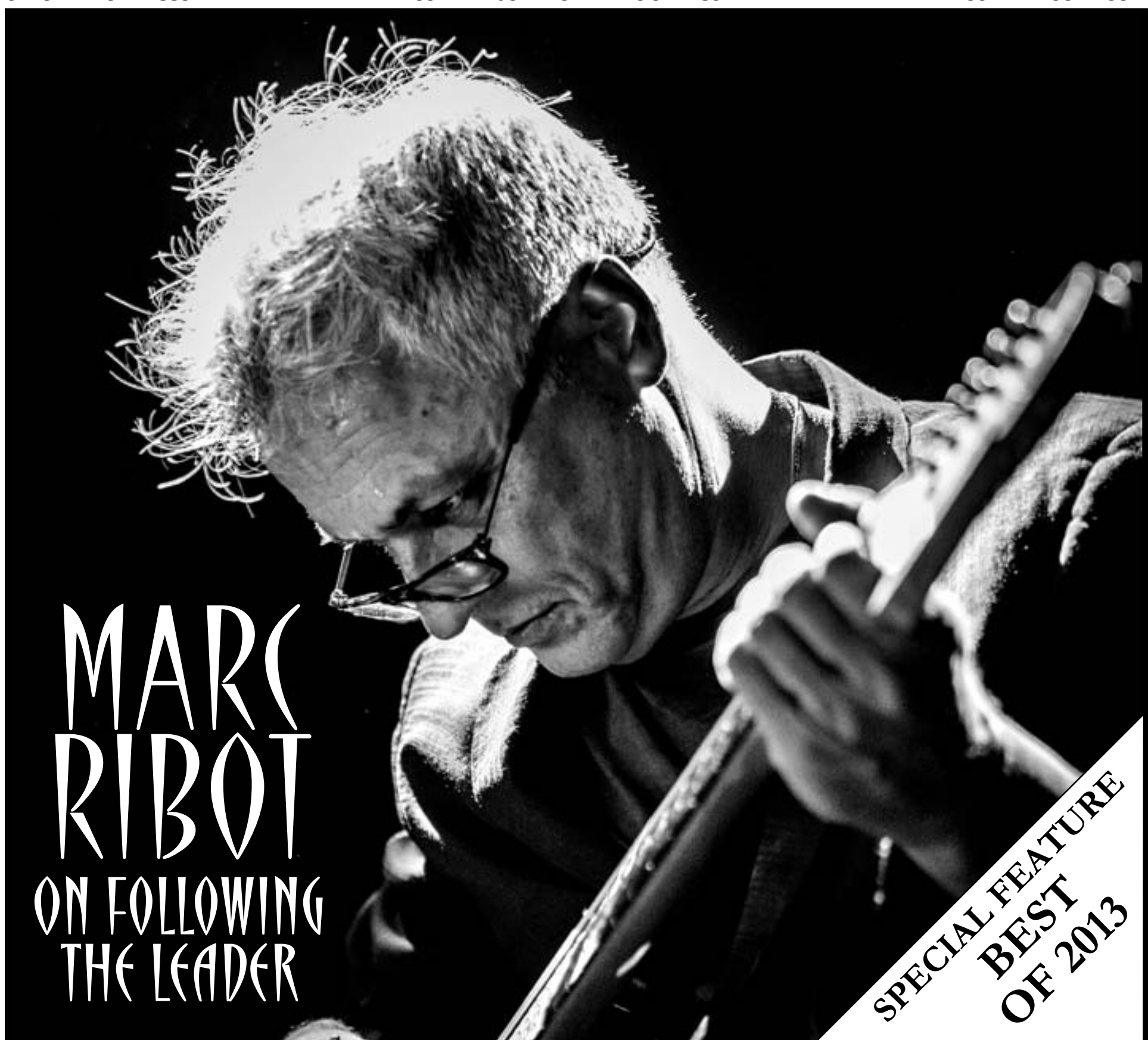


THE NEW YORK CITY JAZZ RECORD

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YOUR FREE GUIDE TO THE NYC JAZZ SCENE

NYCJAZZRECORD.COM



MARC
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ON FOLLOWING
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SPECIAL FEATURE
BEST
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EVENT
CALENDAR



Ensemble Montaigne
(Bau 4) 2013

Anthony Braxton (Leo)



Echo Echo
Mirror House

Anthony Braxton (Victo)

by Ken Waxman

Whenever the controversy about what or who is or isn't jazz is broached, there's likely no more polarizing figure than Anthony Braxton. These recent CDs should add more verbiage to the discussion. Although both are well executed and absorbing, Braxton's protean skills are such that a case can be made either way.

Ensemble Montaigne (Bau 4) was recorded in 2013 by a 10-piece Swiss contemporary music ensemble directed by trombonist Roland Dahinden, who was Braxton's assistant at Wesleyan University. While its 50-minute medley of six Braxton compositions plus improvisations is exciting, it sounds like through-composed music. Without titles, it's unlikely anyone would imagine this isn't a single composition. That said, definition mostly results from an agitated and juddering continuum, which bubbles up at different junctures, bonding parts while moving the performance linearly. The technical virtuosity of Ensemble Montaigne is such that all of its members appear outstandingly capable of performing past orchestral instruments' comfort zones. Particularly noticeable is the strings' ability to blend flying spiccato timbres with lyrical harmonies, plus those times where English horn, bassoon, bass clarinet and French horn - alone or in combinations - manage to output atonal sound shards, before quickly regrouping for intermingled crescendos. By the final few minutes a new jocular theme, played by the horns, asserts itself to blend with buoyant string vibrations for an expressive finale.

Echo Echo Mirror House was recorded live in 2011 at the Festival International de Musique Actuelle de Victoriaville by a septet of Braxton associates, with the composer participating on various saxophones. Perhaps because the hour-plus "Composition No 347" allows the players to add snatches of other Braxton pieces and incorporate still other sounds emanating from the musicians' iPods, the result is as convincingly jazzy as any advanced improvised music. Encompassing vivid stylists like cornet player Taylor Ho Bynum, guitarist Mary Halvorson and Braxton himself, solo interjections are audible, animating the already powerfully staccato creation. With the found sounds emanating from the iPods, the effect is of several compositions being played simultaneously. So-called classical voicing and orchestration are prominently featured, but so are chugging band pulsations reflecting Basie a lot more than Beethoven. Plus, when it comes to Bynum's muted flutter tonguing, Halvorson's tempo-transcending flanges and crunches and Braxton's stuttering intensity, reference points are without doubt improvisations that derive from jazz - if they're not jazz itself. Without question, the visceral excitement missing from the more formal Ensemble Montaigne CD is present here.

With *Echo Echo Mirror House* vibrating with express-train-like tremolo power and *Ensemble Montaigne* making its points through precise tonal juxtaposition, Braxton's musical powers are doubly confirmed. But defining these pieces may be something best left to musicologists.

For more information, visit leorecords.com and victo.qc.ca. Braxton is at Allen Room Jan. 13th as part of the 2014 NEA Jazz Masters Award Ceremony and Concert. See Calendar.

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