

## Press Reviews of AlasNoAxis

**All About Jazz**, Spring 2009, by Glenn Astarita  
Jim Black - Houseplant, Winter and Winter

Stylistically, revered progressive-jazz drummer Jim **Black**'s *Houseplant* might not signify a radical departure from his four previous albums for the Winter & Winter record label, spanning 2000-2006. However, Black's substantial imprint on jazz—and here, jazz-rock—offers a mark of distinction due to his quirky, and sly manner of filling in the blanks from behind the kit. And true to form, he punches out some torrid backbeats throughout this sprightly session, featuring his longtime musical group, Alas No Axis.

Tenor saxophonist Chris Speed occasionally takes the edge off during these largely, thrusting straight-four works, where the literal implications of hybrid jazz-rock underscore the sequence of events. Guitarist Hilmar Jensson's polytonal textures come to light with his sometimes, jangling chord voicings and sweeping rock-based progressions. The program is spotted with climactic motifs, but Black's comps are also designed with catchy riffs and memorable melodies. Yet the band executes a crash-and-burn groove via Jensson's acid-rock lines and Speed's off-kilter excursions on "Malomice."

The musicians intermittently temper the intensity level with introspective phrasings and movements, evidenced on "Elight, for example." And they render warm overtones amid Jensson's twangy phrasings in concert with the drummer's nappy pulse during "Lowers In A Nine Sense." Nonetheless, Black is the accelerator, along with bassist Skuli Sverrisson's limber and pumping attack. Once again, the leader and his comrades uncannily merge a cheery vibe with modern jazz improvisation and hardcore rock parameters that nicely blend into one neatly wrapped package.

**Signal To Noise**, Fall 2006, by Jay Collins  
Jim Black - Dogs of Great Indifference, Winter and Winter

This is the fourth record from Jim Black's AlasNoAxis band, with reedist Chris Speed, guitarist Hilmar Jensson and bassist Skúli Sverrisson. Anyone familiar with this group's work knows that the year-end polls have it all wrong: AlasNoAxis is unquestionably the best electric jazz band working today. With their somber, melancholic atmospheres, their brash musicality and the penchant for the worlds of indie rock and improv, they are without question at the top of the heap. Of course, all the credit goes to Black's ability to juggle so much into such a workable form. With each release, from the self-titled debut, a blueprint for Black's punk jazz meets spacious improv aesthetic to 2004's Habyor, essentially a darkly-hued indie rock disc without the vocals, this assemblage's versatility has made its mark. With this latest outing, the meter tips back to the experimental leanings of their first CD. The rock riffage, thanks to Jensson's guitar shadings and the rhythm section's four on the floor propulsion, seen on tracks like "Star Rubbed" or the melancholic farewell, "I Am Seven," where it's easy to imagine Speed's vocalized cries within a lyrical framework. Jensson also proves instrumental in the epic, cloudy atmospherics that cushion Speed's sonorous tenor on "Everybody Says the Same Thing," but the nasty, overdriven sludge of "Desemrascar" presents the most aggressive and alternatively, during its middle and concluding sections, a mix of murky worlds and flat-out scary environs. The group proves its dexterity on the remarkably restrained "You Know Just Because," driven by Sverrisson's loping bass and Black's mallets as they venture with a sense of hope and regret. But the droney, bleakish atmospherics are a welcome presence and mix well with the heavy grooves. Of these pieces, the quartet is gloomily detached on "Spins So Free," ghostly on "Harmsoft" and haunting on "Harmstrong," the latter sparked by Speed's squelchy sax burrs and Jensson's prickly drones. AlasNoAxis doesn't make music to sip tea to; rather, it is a post-apocalyptic vision formed by Black and his bandmates' interest in improv, rock, jazz and arguably, Black Metal, that likely drives the jazzers out of the room. While *Dogs Of Great Indifference* might not offer any startling new revelations, none are necessary, as this is without a doubt some of the most potently absorbing electric music on the planet.

**All About Jazz**, by C. Michael Bailey  
Jim Black - Dogs of Great Indifference, Winter & Winter

Trying to describe the texture of music is a bit of a vulgar theology. But the imperfect metaphor of texture

is nevertheless the only way to discuss Jim Black's most recent release with Axis No Axis, *Dogs of Great Indifference*. It is an electric soundscape one might think of hearing on Hearts of Space. The core of this tactile-aural experience is formed by the leader, a drummer, with bassist Skuli Sverrisson and guitarist Hilmar Jensson. They lay down the craggy grit over which saxophonist Chris Speed conjures his reed alchemy. Black's beats are mostly simple rock backdoor bombs, occasionally smothered in polyrhythms. This results in music of simple complexity—easy to listen to, until you listen too hard.

Speed, usually a well-behaved soloist, goes unhinged on pieces like the disturbing "Tars and Vanish." Black stirs the pot while the saxophonist slowly injects a horrible truth serum, driving the piece to its violent end. "Spins So Free" is a brief, nervous dream highlighting Sverrisson's arco bass. "Spins" abruptly spins into the relentless "Star Rubbed," featuring Speed's meandering tenor floating over a structure reminiscent of the Police, circa *Regatta de Blanc* (1979). The tracks insinuate themselves into one another. Chris Speed, a level above the texture of the rhythm section, summons sounds from the Middle and Far East, dovetailing with Jensson's electric guitar. The saxophonist serves at the anchor of the recording, keeping everything just a bit askew.

*Dogs of Great Indifference* is that rare brand of music one can eat with a spoon. It is of a droning sort, highly improvised with minimal form. As such, it does not tax the open-minded listener. With so much bad fusion music available, it is nice to find some fresh, clean musical sand to walk on. After so many fine and enjoyable recordings, perhaps we are becoming spoiled to the genius of Jim Black. I hope to see many more.

#### **LA Weekly August 13-19<sup>th</sup>, 2004**

**Summer Songs**, Music for changing seasons and future days by John Payne

Jim Black - Habyor, Winter & Winter

I harp on jazz sometimes because I think it has largely become so rule-bound and square as to be irrelevant, and completely untrue to its original values of creativity and spontaneity. But that's not just me; a lot of young musicians, raised on rock, respecting jazz but not the jazz bible, apparently feel that way, too. So as long as we're on the subject of modernizing jazz, no better place to be than within the music of drummer-composer Jim Black, the mainstay of the New York downtown scene who's infected jazz with rock-aligned power and dynamics with such different thinkers as Laurie Anderson, Ellery Eskelin, Andrea Parkins, Tim Berne, Dave Douglas, Cuong Vu and Uri Caine. Black's frequent collaborator is saxist/multi-instrumentalist Chris Speed, who joins him on this disc, along with guitarist Hilmar Jensson and *deeeeeeep*-toned bassist Skúli Sverrisson. Excellent batch of improv-accommodating tunes that range in tone and emotional heft from floaty Frissellisms to darker-hued and jagged free-jazz skull-prickles. Black's pieces are, like some of the best of '70s jazz-funk, ear-friendly but somehow not mainstream, and, written from a drummer's point of view, usually not bound by melodic convention; his drumming is a way gratifying blend of jazz/new music intuition/complexity with a subtle but slamming rock heft. Somehow, too, this is a jazz-rock fusion that works from within a cooperative (even jam-band) framework, avoiding the obvious solo virtuosity that made so much jazz-rock of the '70s-'80s sound so stupid, with an emphasis more on the one right note properly placed, or how to sparely accent the beats. For our infinitely complex times, I think Black's music, which veers unruffled from pastel calm to dissonant hell, has very *appropriately* never-obvious emotional goals. Bonus: In these hard times, hard, loud, complex music is also a good value for your buck, 'cause it's still revealing its secrets after 50 plays.

**All About Jazz**, August 2004, by C. Michael Bailey

Jim Black - Habyor, Winter & Winter

This is not jazz-rock fusion. This is not adult contemporary jazz. For God's sake, this is certainly not *smooth* jazz. Seattle-bred and New York City-based drummer Jim Black's third AlasNoAxis recording continues where he left off on *Splay* (Winter & Winter, 2002)—exploring the rock side of jazz. Think of AlasNoAxis as a well-behaved Jonas Hellborg/Shawn Lane collaboration with a wide open reeds player. The music is well-constructed with a heavy edge of heavy metal. "Rade" begins like a Black Sabbath concert gone horribly wrong, before settling into brooding groove with Hilmar Jensson finger-picking his guitar beneath the invaluable Chris Speed's reeds. Skuli Sverrisson's bass plays a buoyant counterpoint to Jensson. Black alternates between brushes and sticks, giving the piece a multitextured character that

permeates the remainder of the disc.

This same modus operandi passes through all of the compositions like a gold thread joining each piece with a thematic strand. The harmonies are sinister in the best sense of the word, i.e. not allowing for a relaxing listening experience. No, this is the music of the primal scream—liberating, cleansing, exhilarating. But that primal scream is controlled as the chain reaction of a nuclear reactor is contained, until you get to “Hello Kombiant,” which dissolves into a solution of pure beautiful anarchy. Jim Black provides a relentless rhythm-beat, a chaotic stroke collection perfectly suited for 21st Century NYC. The Wurlitzer piano and melodica are used throughout the disc, but never to excess. If a single instrument stands out, it is Jensson's guitar. Jensson and Black propel *Habyor* right on to my best-of-year list. A weirdly wonderful and superb recording.

### **Jazz Views England, All About Jazz 2004**

Jim Black - Habyor, Winter & Winter

Drummer Jim Black reconvenes his Alasnoaxis band for its third outing on the Winter & Winter label, this time delving even further into song form than on the first two releases. More than a little influenced by alt rock bands, there are still tastes of progressive and art rock in the mix, but the emphasis is definitely on *rock*. Fans of more traditional jazz will, no doubt, shy away from *Habyor*, but more adventurous listeners who don't mind examining the spaces between genres will be satisfied by this, another strong recording by the outfit.

The emphasis on song means that the thrust is on arrangement, and what improvisation there is gets kept to a minimum, over strict form. But loose improvisation is not what this group is about. Black seems content to drive the groove with a relaxed yet powerful approach. Guitarist Hilmar Jensson, while still retaining some of his David Torn and Robert Fripp influences, is less processed than either and is content to work as a rhythm section player, never actually soloing. Bassist Skuli Sverrisson anchors the session with Black, at times taking a dominant role in defining the melody. But the main source of melody and solos is reed player Chris Speed, who is strong yet restrained.

The whole point of Alasnoaxis is less about broader technical displays and more about direct service to the song. On these ten relatively short compositions these players manage to navigate odd time signatures and a diversity of feels and textures that lean heavily towards the kinetic. This is music that demands attention and is best played *loud*. Think guitarist Nels Cline's Singers with more emphasis on simple composition and improvisation that is more closely rooted to form. But there *are* some moments of collective improvisation, such as at the end of “Hello Kombiant,” which breaks down into pure chaos, and “Let It Down,” where Speed opens up and blows hard and heavy.

Black has long been an in-demand player with some of the best of the New York improvising scene, including Tim Berne, Dave Douglas and Ellery Eskelin, but it is only with the advent of Alasnoaxis that his personal tastes and predilection for more tune-oriented material have become known. *Habyor* may not make fans of purist jazz fans, but with singable melodies over mostly assertive rhythms, he creates engaging music that may draw more rock-oriented listeners over to the “dark side.”

~ John Kelman

### **Sandman Magazine, Leeds, England 2004**

**Alas No Axis @ The Wardrobe**

New York drummer Jim Black has spent the last ten years or so busking and developing his formidable and idiosyncratic technique with some of the leading lights in modern jazz. Formed in 2000, Alas No Axis is a vehicle for his own thoughtful and dynamic compositions. The band is a quartet of two seemingly incongruous halves, with Black and fellow American Chris Speed, on tenor and clarinet, pitching the acoustic camp, and Icelanders Skuli Sverrisson on bass and Hilmar Jensson on guitar of the electric persuasion.

Black is as influenced by the volume and dynamics of rock as the tradition that supports modern jazz and his tunes bring the two together to form something, well, just a bit different. On the electric side, Sverrisson mostly provides simple, deep anchoring bass lines while Jensson slashes out sheets of

chords or hurls glittering broken glass shards of note clusters. In the acoustic half Speed's mournful tenor and flute like clarinet supply the conventional melodies, while Black's completely unpredictable and endlessly inventive drumming supplies what could be described as rhythmic melody.

The songs are mostly from the bands new CD "Habyor", but the live versions have a raw urgency missing from the recorded versions. The band starts with a couple of slow, mournful tunes but gradually wind up the intensity as the gig progresses. In the past the band generated lots of noise and bustle but the new music boasts a more measured approach that accommodates subtlety more easily, making the few floorboard shaking moment even more effective. Many of the tunes begin with ambient improvisations, Black employing a kind of sampler to supplement his percussion, that gradually morph into the arranged pieces. -Johnny Ersatz-Culture