

SIGNAL to NOISE

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Liberty Ellman *Ophiuchus Butterfly*

Pi 19 CD

Want proof that jazz is neither dead nor smells funny? Look no further than the recent output of labels like Pi Recordings which continue to release music that is influenced by the multi-dimensional experiences that shape our information and communication-obsessed society but do so in a manner that is both accessible

and with vision. This sense of adventure and search for new horizons is particularly important for today's ambitious younger musicians like guitarist Liberty Ellman. On *Ophiuchus Butterfly*, his second for the label, Ellman picks up where his impressive debut quartet record, *Tactiles*, left off. This time, Ellman broadens his compositional focus, with ten pieces written for a sextet, resulting in a program that reflects a keen interest in the potency of rhythm. With a primary focus on a meaty bottom end, the front-line, including Ellman himself, is free to create highly interactive statements, with the horns frequently intertwining, whether as simultaneous soloists or as part of tightly written ensemble pieces. As for the ensemble, Ellman collects some of today's brightest young names like alto saxophonist Steve Lehman, tenor saxophonist Mark Shim, tubist Jesse Davilla, Bassist Stephan Crump and drummer Gerald Cleaver. The emphasis on the groove is apparent from the get-go, as the M-Basey opening cut "Ophiuchus Butterfly" allows Lehman and Shim plenty of room to interact amidst the knotty written material, though arguably the key is the weighty underflow sparked by Davilla's booting tuba and Crump's fat stringmanship. This

carefully scripted ensemble easily meets Ellman's challenges on the busy "You Have Ears," a muted horn reverie that becomes a jagged landscape for Ellman's guitar and Shim's gushing thoughts, as well as the terse "The Naturalists" and the doubled-up patterns of "Looking Up," with Shim turning in a particularly arresting solo over the fluid vamp. In addition to these well-planned excursions, Ellman also lets the ensemble run free, sometimes constructing relatively terse outlines for the musicians to have their say, such as the busy "Tarmacadeam" or "Chromos," a descending line that stays stuck in your head long after the track concludes. Ellman attempts to resolve several worlds here, and is most ambitious on "Pretty Words, Like Blades," a forum for a ghostly, hybridized electronic/acoustic terrain that utilizes subtle plugged-in touches to underscore the rhythmic jaunts, though Ellman is at his most sensitive during the balladry of "Aestivation," highlighted by Lehman's aching alto and Shim's smoldering tenor. Following up on such diversity, the cosmic dreamworld of "Snow Lips" oscillates, while the record's final moments of "Borealis" presents the ensemble in free-for-all mode. *Ophiuchus Butterfly* is a worthy spotlight for Ellman's

emerging talents as a composer for this excellent assemblage and without a doubt, will be one of 2006's top records. **Jay Collins**