



EXCAVATING BEN

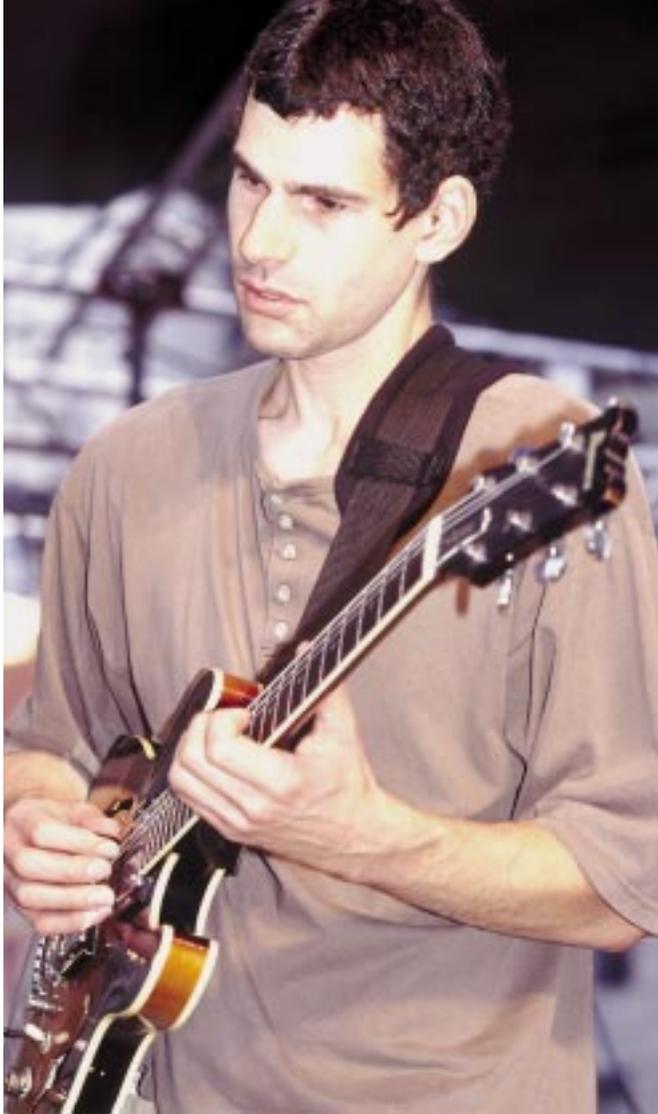
BEN MONDER'S *OCEANA*, THE FIRST CD IN FIVE YEARS FOR THE ENIGMATIC GUITARIST, IS A STUNNING ACHIEVEMENT.

BY DAVID ADLER

IF BEN MONDER'S MUSIC SPEAKS FOR ITSELF, it can also be said that he is not big on speaking about it. One colleague called him "a man of many silences." Even *Monder*, in an old, outlandish bio, makes a reference to his "sullen demeanor." On the bandstand he is stationary and expressionless, even as the most extraordinary sounds pour forth from his instrument. He is "a statue of harmonic liberty," to quote another of his peers.

But despite *Monder's* reticence, many can attest to his dry and devastating wit. And those who've worked with him tend to agree: He has exhibited some of the most original musical thinking of the present age.





As a leader, Monder can't be called prolific, having issued only four recordings (and one co-led session) in 10 years. But each one, beginning with *Flux*, his 1995 Songlines debut, is more momentous than the last. Between projects, he is anything but idle—in fact, he's one of the busiest sidemen in jazz.

It is no exaggeration to say that Monder has earned the all-out devotion of his fellows. He's appeared on some 90 CDs. He's held the guitar chair in the Maria Schneider Orchestra for more than 10 years. ("You'll never hear the obvious out of Ben," Schneider says.) He splits guitar duties with Steve Cardenas in Paul Motian's Electric Bebop Band. He also plays with Motian in saxophonist Bill McHenry's quartet, featuring Bad Plus bassist Reid Anderson. He's in a new Tony Malaby quintet. The exceptional altoist Loren Stillman is using him on gigs. "I can't imagine doing a recording without him," says saxophonist Tim Ries, who indeed has hired Monder for every album he's made, including this year's Concord release *The Rolling Stones Project* (dig Monder with Bill Charlap, John Patitucci and Brian Blade on "Paint It Black").

Monder is dedicated above all to his own music, but he takes his time. Better to wait five years and release something staggering than to flood the market with music that is less than fully realized. Saxophonist and composer Patrick Zimmerli, who featured Monder on his Songlines releases *Explosion*, *Expansion* and *The Book of Hours*, says it best: "He's been quietly working for over 20 years at his craft, plugging away at his own speed, tackling large and important musical issues without regard for careerism or commercial success. Ben is an unregenerate idealist, someone we can all look up to as a beacon of rigor and dedication to art."

MONDER'S NEW ALBUM, *OCEANA* (SUNNYSIDE), BUILDS on the triumph of 2000's *Excavation* (Arabesque). The two discs are organized along similar lines: quartet with electric bass and Theo Bleckmann on wordless vocals, plus a pair of extraordinary solo-guitar pieces. Skuli Sverrisson, the bassist on *Excavation*, appears on *Oceana*'s final two cuts ("Rooms of Light" and "Spectre"). Kermit Driscoll, an alum of Bill Frisell's late-'80s and early-'90s group, plays bass on "Echolalia" and the title track. And Ted Poor takes over for Jim Black, who has played drums on every Monder recording until now. "I met Ted about three years ago," Monder says. "I went to Eastman to do a clinic, and he was a senior there. He played a couple of my tunes, and I couldn't believe how good he sounded. I left there thinking, 'Was that as good as I thought it was? No, couldn't have been.' So I hired him for a gig and he sounded unbelievable. At that point my decision was made."

In Monder's music there is always give-and-take between composition and improvisation, between outsized epics like "Ellenville" and "Hatchet Face" and solo-oriented tunes like "Luteous Pangolin" and "Sunny Manitoba." With *Oceana*, Monder swings sharply toward composition. "There's only two solos on the entire record," he laughs. Take the nearly 17-minute title track: The music is meticulously charted and difficult to the point of impossibility, the sort of stuff Monder must play sitting down with a classical-guitar footstool. (Monder's fingerstyle technique is "homegrown," not the result of strict classical training.) His emphasis on wholly composed material is not permanent, however. "I'm in this for the improvisation," he says. "I don't want to abandon really dense writing because it's part of what I'm hearing, but on my gigs I'd like to balance the ratio."

With their mercurial arpeggios, leaping intervals, sonorous melodies and counterintuitive rhythms, Monder's through-composed pieces defy comparison. But it is color and mood, not just jaw-dropping complexity, that sets this work apart. The opening patterns of "Oceana" could hardly be any busier, but they fall upon the ear with a disarming gentleness. The raging, distortion-heavy groove of "Rooms of Light" (also nearly 17 minutes) is a different story, but even this is leavened by the timbre of the guitar-vocal unison passages. Pianist Frank Kimbrough, who once enlisted Monder in a bass-free quartet called Noumena, says that the guitarist "has practically created his own musical language: voicings and lines I've never heard anywhere else, just at the edge of functionality and abstraction, ethereal, dark and mysterious."

The vocal element in Monder's music enhances its mystery, but also its accessibility. Theo Bleckmann, himself a unique force in creative music, has built a rapport with Monder in duo and other contexts over the past decade. (Their first co-led project since 1997's *No Boat* will come out on Songlines in 2006.) "To take music on the edge of singability and make it sing has always been one of my favorite challenges," Bleckmann says. His mid-register legato tones and haunting falsettos are a balm, particularly on "Echolalia," but Bleckmann can also nail cues and convoluted eighth notes that would make a lesser singer crumble. "I started hearing stuff for voice as a separate instrument," Monder says. The result isn't a world away from the vocalizing of the Pat Metheny Group, but it is stranger, more technically demanding and less of an add-on. Monder has spoken of his love for Alfred Schnittke's "Psalms of Repentance" (1988), a mesmerizing 12-part piece for mixed choir. There is something of that flavor in Bleckmann's contributions, particularly on *Oceana*'s second track, "Light," a one-minute a cappella extract from "Rooms of Light."

MONDER'S SOLO-GUITAR PIECES CONSTITUTE A BODY OF work in their own right. All of his discs include at least one. On *Flux* there were three: "Red Shifts," "Orbits" and "Propane Dream." On *Dust* (Arabesque, 1997) there was "In Memoriam." *Excavation* led off

with the impenetrable “Mistral” and also featured “Windowpane.” *Oceana* begins with Monder on his 1936 Martin acoustic, kindling the luminescent cadences of “Still Motion.” Later in the set he returns to electric for “Double Sun.”

“The solo pieces usually derive from some technical problem that I decide to tackle,” Monder says. “‘Still Motion’ and ‘Mistral’ are finger-picking patterns I discovered that became the basis for a tune. I feel I need to limit myself to as few parameters as possible, to give myself some kind of direction, and things proceed from there.” Monder follows the same course, more or less, for group pieces. “Everything stems from a really minimal idea, whether it’s rhythmic, harmonic or melodic,” he says, noting in passing that he’s worked up a solo guitar arrangement of “Oceana” as well. “Pretty much the entirety of ‘Oceana’ stems from this five-note idea, basically the first five notes of the tune. Harmonically there’s a lot of pure voice leading—modulation through voice leading as opposed to function.”

“Still Motion” is in standard tuning, but often this is not the case with the solo-guitar works. On “Double Sun,” Monder says, “the E string is tuned down to a C and the A is tuned down to a G, so I’ve got

At first Monder might seem closest to such players as Bill Frisell and John Abercrombie, with their fluid but essentially unflashy styles and occasional use of steel-strings and distortion pedals. But in his mystic harmonic vocabulary, and in the sheer technical ambition of his solo-guitar pieces, one could posit a kinship with Ralph Towner (although Monder never plays nylon- or 12-string guitars, much less piano).

And yet Monder possesses a singular voice. It comes through in his countless sideman appearances, beginning with his maiden voyage on Marc Johnson’s *Right Brain Patrol* (JMT, 1992). Other treasures in the discography include Chris Cheek’s *A Girl Named Joe*, Reid Anderson’s *The Vastness of Space*, Gerald Cleaver’s *Adjust*, Guillermo Klein’s *Los Guachos II* and *III*, Jerome Sabbagh’s *North* and Bill McHenry’s three discs to date. (All but the Klein CDs are on Fresh Sound New Talent.) Playing with McHenry’s quartet recently at the Village Vanguard, Monder transitioned from a long and abstract suite to a down-the-line reading of “I Can’t Get Started.” In that window of roughly 20 minutes, his depth and versatility seemed limitless. If anything, his solo on the standard was even more reaching and intergalactic, though he barely strayed from the original chord changes.

“Ben practically created his own musical language: voicings and lines I’ve never heard anywhere else, just at the edge of functionality and abstraction, ethereal, dark and mysterious.”—Frank Kimbrough

those fifths on the lower three strings. On ‘Mistral’ the low E is tuned to a C sharp, and on ‘Windowpane’ it’s tuned to D. ‘Orbits,’ from *Flux*, has the upper two strings tuned down a whole step. Harmonically, on ‘Double Sun’ I wanted the effect of bitonality as well as the polymeter. The [odd] tuning was the best way to effect that. I’m exploring this polyrhythm of five against three. I’ve got three in the bass and five on the top three strings, and I’m playing a cycle of four in each of the parts, so the five over three is disguised. It starts out in A major but I’ve got C, G and D in the bass so it’s kind of like A over C. And that shifts through the course of the piece—it gets more consonant and ends up in C. But it starts in A over C and then A flat over C, which is C Aeolian. There are also parts where it’s A over G.”

These theoretical elements work a hidden magic, for it isn’t the nuts and bolts but rather the empyrean, otherworldly quality of Monder’s music that lingers in the mind. In a 2002 e-mail interview with *All About Jazz*, Monder wrote with deadpan sarcasm of his attempt “to effect a marriage of the multifarious and often conflicting elements of Man’s unconscious: the urge to self-immolation with the urge for self-knowledge; the divine alongside the demonic.” This was a “100 percent” put-on, Monder insists. But what makes it funny is that it could be true.

So where do the sounds come from, and what might they signify? “I don’t have a conscious access to what’s going on creatively,” Monder says. “I’ll spend time composing something, and when I’m done I have no idea how that just happened. I have no memory of really even doing it, or what I thought about.” This does not mean, however, that the music arrives fully formed. “Things very rarely just write themselves,” he clarifies. “Ideas sometimes come pretty readily, but fleshing out the ideas is another story.”

This is where the legendary Monder work ethic comes into play. According to Patrick Zimmerli, “A fun week for Ben is when he can put in 16-hour days—I kid you not, 16-hour days—with his guitar. His ridiculous chops definitely did not appear out of thin air.”

ON 1995’S *FLUX*, MONDER HAS A DISTINCTLY BRIGHTER guitar sound than he uses today (although the writing remains representative). It’s easy to forget that he cut his professional teeth with the soul-jazz organist Jack McDuff. But already on *Dust*, from 1997, we hear a much darker tone, not to mention a more refined melodic sense.

Commercially, Monder’s situation is fairly typical: cherished by those in the jazz world who have heard him—and barely known outside of it. Even to arrive at that stage is a struggle, regardless of proficiency. While Monder’s artistic pace is deliberate, the long wait between albums also speaks to the scarcity of record deals and the pinch felt by even the most risk-inclined labels. Finding a place for music this challenging is never easy, particularly for a player who doggedly puts music over business. But Monder is taking necessary steps. He has bought back his masters, pared down his teaching duties and focused on what lies ahead. He might spend roughly a third of the year on the road, but he’s never in doubt about his creative home. **JT**

Listening Pleasures

Meshuggah, *Catch Thirty-Three* (Nuclear Blast America)

Conlon Nancarrow, *Studies for Player Piano* (Wergo)

Charles Wuorinen, “Time’s Encomium,” from *Lepton* (Tzadik)

Gene Bertoncini, *Quiet Now* (Ambient)

Nikhil Banerjee, *Sitar: Live Concert Volume 7—Raag Marubehag* (Chhanda Dhara)

Gearbox

Electric guitar: Monder has played the same Ibanez AS-50 for 20 years. “I haven’t changed the strings,” he deadpans.

Acoustic guitar: 1936 small-body Martin (model unknown).

Amps: Stereo setup pairing a Music Man and a ‘68 Fender Princeton Reverb, modified by Harry Kolbe.

Effects: Upgraded Lexicon LXP-1, Boss delay, Rat distortion, Ernie Ball volume pedal.

Strings: D’Addario .13s with an unwound G (.20).

Picks: D’Andrea Pro Plec 1.5mm extraheavy teardrop.