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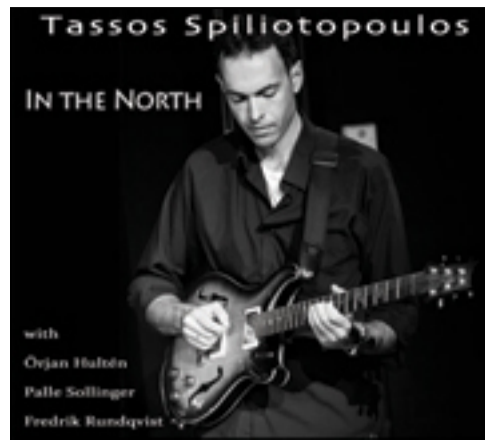
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**Tassos Spiliotopoulos: *In the North***

Anelia Records

Though jazz guitarist Tassos Spiliotopoulos hails from Athens, Greece, he lived in London for more than a decade and since 2013 has called Stockholm, Sweden home. Such a lifestyle has afforded him the opportunity to work with many musicians, among them Kenny Wheeler, Gary Husband, John Parricelli, Dimitri Vassilakis, Mike Outram, and John Etheridge. Spiliotopoulos has also played in a number of group contexts, including the quartet he formed with drummer Asaf Sirkis, saxophonist Robin Fincker, and bassist Yaron Stavi in 2005, a format to which he's apparently drawn, given that it's the same on his third solo album *In the North*. In similar manner, just as the concept for the earlier quartet was rooted in the combination of lyrical compositional writing and high-energy improvising, that same concept would appear to be very much in place on the new recording, too.

As often happens, serendipity played a part in the group's formation: while taking part in *Tune-up Järva*, a project geared towards highlighting the musical creativity of northern Stockholm, Spiliotopoulos, who had been looking for a band to play with in the area, encountered saxophonist Örjan Hultén and the other members of his trio, drummer Fredrik Rundqvist and acoustic bassist Palle Sollinger, and felt an automatic kinship. After playing a few local gigs, the newly born quartet embarked in June 2015 to the Small House studios in Tyresö to record the eight-track, fifty-four-minute album.

Certainly one of the things that stands out most about *In the North* is its cohesiveness. That impression can be accounted for, firstly, by the fact that all compositions are by Spiliotopoulos but even more by the sense of connection exemplified by the playing; the impression established is of musicians who've developed strong familiarity with each other's playing and telepathic ties to one another. When one person solos, the others support him with accompaniment that's sympathetic but not overpowering. Further to that, though it's clearly Spiliotopoulos's show, he's hardly the only voice heard; if anything the playing is democratic, and front-line soloing is split between the guitarist and Hultén. Technically strong, the leader's also a graceful and melodic player who eschews distortion and abrasion; on tenor and soprano saxophones, Hultén is likewise robust and muscular but not overbearing. Rundqvist and Sollinger impress, too, for the invention they display whilst keeping the music in constant motion.

In terms of approach, the group opts for an accessible style that's contemporary but not avant-garde, and while the music is firmly grounded in the jazz idiom, it also draws from other forms, among them blues, flamenco, and folk. Such influences are integrated seamlessly, however: when a blues feel emerges, as it does during "Emerald Blues," it emerges so subtly a casual listener could miss it. Fluid, high-level interactions between the four are present throughout, from the breezy opener "Waterfall" to the lyrical closer "Old Demons." The gentler side of the quartet is brought to the fore during the ballad "Downfall Monologue," and while the guitarist's chops are put to the test on the melodically intricate "By Way of Fire" and the freewheeling "Friday Frolics," *In the North* never comes across as a self-indulgent exercise in virtuosity. On this recording, all involved put the music ahead of any one player, and other aspiring groups could benefit from the quartet's example.

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