

# TOWER TRIBUNE

NEW AGE

## Benjamin Verdery gets in the travel mode



Benjamin Verdery

Listening to Benjamin Verdery's *Some Towns and Cities* (Newport Classic) is like taking a trip around the country with a guide who skips the usual tourist traps and gets to the essence of each location. Verdery's style is recognizably American, yet his perspective on 15 U.S. cities is devoid of

clichés.

On this recording, Verdery's got some powerful musicians playing with him. "Sylacauga, AL" is a duo with classical guitar heavy John Williams. "Los Angeles, CA" showcases the talents of frame drummer Glen Velez and jazz bassist Harvie Swartz, among others. "Tucson, AZ" opens with a moody duet featuring renowned classical guitarist, Paco Pena that captures the tranquility, mystery and danger of the desert, hints at Tucson's Spanish heritage, and then bursts into an off-beat portrayal of the city's "Wild West" energy with the help of marimbay player Craig Peyton and the percussionists of Rhythm Exchange.

Equally unpredictable is the final cut, "Mobile, AL," a duo with Leo Kottke. It sounds like these guys rejected the city's genteel Southern image to sit on some blue-collar worker's back porch playing bluesy bottle-neck guitar and waxing poetic on the real ups and downs of life in America.

—Linda Kohanov

## Jazz veterans have their say

JAZZ



Hal Russell and Mars Williams

Chicago's Hal Russell is a 65-year-old multi-instrumental vaudeville master. *The Finnish/Swiss Tour* (ECM) is Russell's first shot at a wider audience than he can get selling cassettes off the stage. The NRG Ensemble, a talented quartet of multiple ax wielders (not murderers—those noises you hear on the CD are post-AACM/Trane/Ayler/Ornette vocabulary) who average half their Fearless Leader's age. Scrabbling, angular tunes like "Hal the Weenie" launch free improvisations toward whatever part of the stratosphere seems open for business. Bring your funny bone.

Many veteran leaders have their say this month, though with mixed results. Jack DeJohnette's *Special Edition*, an outstanding combo of younger players that includes Plaxico, Greg Osby and Gary Thomas, shares pianist Mike Cain with Cox. On *Earthwalk* (Blue Note), the group lives up to its rep as a hard-blowing outfit, though the material's quality varies. Labelmate Don Pullen veers in a startlingly different direction on *Kele Mou Bana* (Blue Note), an Afro-Brazilian outing that boasts Carlos Ward. It sometimes feels close conceptually to the relaxed rollicking of Abdullah Ibrahim, sometimes heads pretty far outside. Phil Woods and Jim McNeely team up for the scrappy tribute *Flowers for Hodges* (Concord)—with a sandpaper-raw Woods vocal! Texas tenorman James Clay turns in a spicy idiomatic stew on *Cookin' at the Continental* (Antilles). And the fun-loving-with-a-fearsome-groove Dirty Dozen Brass Band struts through *Open Up: Whatcha Gonna Do for the Rest of Your Life* (Columbia).

—Gene Santoro

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