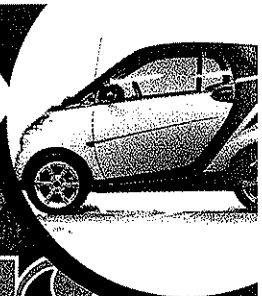


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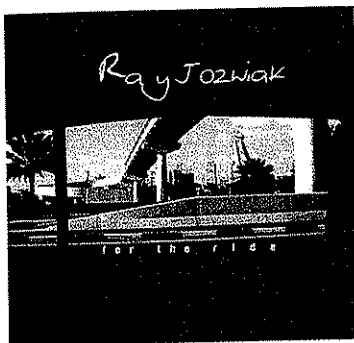


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Ray Jozwiak

For the Ride (self-released)

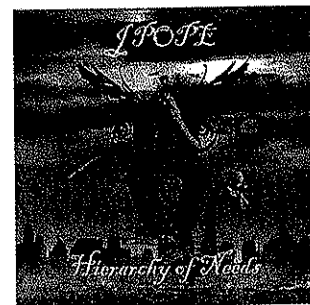
A few years ago, I stumbled across Jozwiak at the Belvedere Hotel, where he had a weekly gig at the bar. But Jozwiak wasn't your typical lounge pianist. Far from it. He played with a bold, angular style that certainly distinguished itself in a room where standards and show tunes would seem to be the norm. No wonder he referred to himself as a "gonzo" pianist at the time. A similar spirit pervades this disc, which is comprised mostly of solo pieces. Jozwiak's playing certainly owes a debt to Thelonious Monk, but the pay-off is an offbeat, idiosyncratic style that makes tunes such as "Joyride" and "Monday" so enjoyable. Just when it sounds like a melody might fracture and its notes might slide away completely, Jozwiak rescues it with a sweeping left hand that holds everything together. And he does that again and again. The only misstep here is "Joyride II," a song marred by accompaniment as canned as it is annoying.

J Pope

Hierarchy of Needs

(self-released)

At this point, it's refreshing to hear a hip-hop artist sing about a world more upbeat than beat up. Mashing hip-hop rhythms with soulful melodies and an expansive point of view, J Pope projects a sense of purpose that's all too rare these days. Like Lauryn Hill and Erykah Badu, she doesn't shy from political, social, and religious issues, and she frames them with a positive vibe that makes "You're Not Here," "Check Your Soul," and the title track incredibly appealing. You can practically hear the "Yes-We-Can" chant between the lines.



To read more of Arts and Culture Editor John Lewis's musings on Baltimore's arts scene, check out his blog, All the Pieces Matter, at baltimoremagazine.net/allthepiecesmatter.

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