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Today is Sunday March 27, 2011

## [We Are A Northern People \(CD reviews\)](#)

By [phum](#) Tue, Mar 22 2011 [COMMENTS\(0\)](#) [Jazzblog.ca](#)

Filed under: [Ingrid Jensen](#), [Joe Sullivan](#), [CD reviews](#), [Amanda Tosoff](#)

So said Robertson Davies. judging by the titles of their recent CDs, the Canadian jazz musicians Amanda Tosoff (A Torontonian by way of Vancouver) and Andrew Rathbun (A Brooklynite by way of Toronto) agree...

### **Looking North (Oceans Beyond) Amanda Tosoff**

The young, Toronto-based pianist Amanda Tosoff is a thoughtful composer and arranger, well-developed knack for animating her material with fine counterpoint and colourful sonic combinations.

On her third CD, She's in excellent company. Saxophonist Evan Arntzen, bassist Sean Cronin and drummer Morgan Childs have been playing with Tosoff for years, since they were schoolmates in Vancouver. This core group of musicians lifts the music off the ground with audible interaction, co-operation and attention to nuance and flow. Guest musicians -- trumpeter Ingrid Jensen, saxophonist Kelly Jefferson and trombonist William Carn -- are icing on the cake. They broaden Tosoff's arranging palette on several tunes and each contributes unfettered solos that enrich Tosoff's material.

Looking North greets listeners with an feel-good, infectious vibe, as drummer Childs -- who fuels the music smartly and powerfully throughout the disc -- lays down an undulating New Orleans-style beat. *Bluke* (as in a blues for Duke Ellington) is a funky blues distinguished by some classy counterpoint and Tosoff's cool electric piano. The writing for horns nods to Ellington's *Far East Suite*, but the solos by Carn, Jefferson and Tosoff are new-generation catchy and immediate.

*M.I.A.* is another Tosoff tune with Ellington at its root. I don't know *Mercuria*, *The Lion*, the Duke piece that Tosoff admits she's borrowed from, but her own piece is forthright swinging tune with its own identity. Arntzen's soprano saxophone and Jensen's trumpet give Tosoff's melody wings, and their solos, aided by the righteously swinging rhythm section, are substantial and pleasing. *Concept 2010* is a slightly more modern and post-bopping, less Ducal take on swinging.

The tunes that have lodged most deeply in my memory on the most overtly lyrical, expansive ones. *Invisible*, brought in by Cronin's weighty, inspired introduction, is a bolero-style ballad and a showcase for Arntzen's emotional tenor saxophone, which recalls Joe Henderson at times. Tosoff shines most on *Leaves Changing*, a pastoral ballad that features her electric piano and some nice writing for horns behind her.

Two more tunes with Carn and Jefferson enlarging the size of the ensemble are similarly vivid. *Goodbye Gray Sky* is a slow, classy, swinging waltz with Jefferson and Jensen stepping up with direct, powerful solos. *Sounds Through The Window* is a nice imaginative stretch. For the most part, it's a highly rhythmic, "African" take on 5/4 (or 15/8, if larger numbers suit you). Tosoff uncorks some of her most impressive playing on the CD above a bed of complimentary percussion before some spirited trading for four horns. Tosoff herself has put the track up on YouTube, and here it is:





The title track is in fact a short but evocative piano solo, with which Tosoff meant to convey an impression of the Rockies near Banff. It's followed by the disc's moody, modern closer, *Got It*, ostensibly spun off from Duke Ellington's *I Got It Bad*. It's another richly layered effort by Tosoff, with Arntzen and Tosoff dancing together melodically before a prolonged, scene-shifting coda gives Jensen a fitting final word for the CD.

I wondered a while back why Tosoff and Childs moved from Vancouver, which seems to have its own flourishing jazz scene, to Toronto. The pianist's new CD seems to provide an answer. There's no doubt that Tosoff, having moved east and made *Looking North*, is growing artistically. Her last CD, 2009's *Lost and Found*, was accomplished, but *Looking North* is richer, deeper and more colourful.

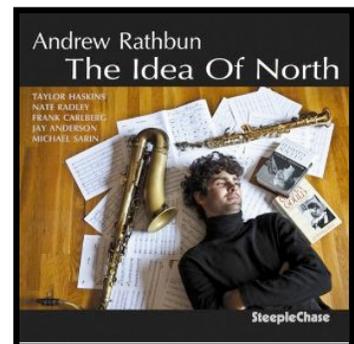
**PS:** In case you had not seen it, [Tosoff recently reported on the Brad Mehldau masterclass that she attended for the blog.](#)

### The Idea of North (Steeplechase)

Andrew Rathbun

Andrew Rathbun, the Brooklyn-based saxophonist and composer, hasn't forgotten his Canadian roots. His most recent recording was inspired by Canada and especially by Glenn Gould's CBC radio documentaries, which were also titled *The Idea of North*. (Ever mindful of connections and comparisons, I'll mention that Toronto pianist David Braid's recent works include a two-parter called *Resolute Bay (Parts 1 and 2)*, and that this wide-roaming, exploratory, oh-so-Canadian creation was also written with Gould's *The Idea of North* in mind.)

On Rathbun's disc, the titles of six of eight tracks -- *Echoes*, *Harsh*, *Across the Country*, *December*, *Rockies*, *Arctic* -- suggest a tightly focused vision of Canada. It's fitting then that Rathbun's compositions tend to the complex, uncompromising and rugged, illuminated and enriched by vigorous solos by himself, trumpeter Taylor Haskins, pianist Frank Carlberg (deep-toned bassist Jay Anderson and the keenly aware, flowing drummer Michael Sarin complete Rathbun's quintet). Insofar as our natural world may contribute to a Canadian character or way of seeing things, Rathbun offers music that means to resonate with the sounds of solitude and openness. (For his part, Braid has said that his Gould-inspired work reflects a Canadian kind of introspection, if I recall correctly.)



Rathbun's music is advanced and probing, marked at times by some of the post-Rosenwinkel/Turner kinds of melodies, textures and formal features that now typify a branch of the contemporary jazz tree. There's also some Kenny Wheeler and Wayne Shorter in Rathbun's mix, I'd suggest, and furthermore, Rathbun also acknowledges that in paying tribute to Gould, he sought to stress counterpoint with his original creations, given Gould's mastery of multiple melodies. You can hear the proof on the jagged *Harsh*, which after its opening contrapuntal exposition travels into more open and abstract territory as the horns meander over Radley's swelling chords and Carlberg's mysterious piano work. *Across the Country*, launched by a typically forceful and authoritative Anderson solo introduction, is a fast, stirring 3/4 tune. On this and other tracks, the freedom with which the bassist accompanies highlights Rathbun's contrapuntal priorities in real time.

On *Rockies*, syncopated rocking and angular lines give way to a Carlberg's heady, swirling, nimble solo turn and then a stretch by Rathbun that's full of enigmas, shadowed by Radley's ringing guitar. *Arctic* features some fine, fleshed-out writing for the rhythm section, over which Rathbun places a compelling, driving melody for horns. Haskins, Radley and Rathbun assert their own characters in turn.

Two covers somewhat offset the disc's feeling of intellectual rigour. Wayner Shorter's ballad *Teru*, while certainly complex and contemporary in its own right, sounds almost like a conventional brevity nestled among Rathbun's music thanks to the clarity and simplicity of Rathbun's deft arrangement. The most singable and traditional of the disc's selections is *Minuet & Dance of the Blessed Spirits*, by the 18th century German