



**Re Up**  
**Greg Skaff (Soulmation)**  
 by Jeff Cebulski

Veteran NYC guitarist Greg Skaff's seventh album, *Re Up*, finds him moving from a fairly restrained approach, as shown on his previous trio album, *Polaris* (2021), to a reenergized state. That prior recording featured eminent bassist Ron Carter and the loquacious and recently deceased drummer Albert "Tootie" Heath in an initially restive performance, which then settled down considerably. According to the liner notes to this new album, the title refers to "an act or instance of replenishing."

Skaff's current working trio—the eloquent Ugonna Okegwo (bass) and the horizontally colloquial Jonathan Barber (drums)—support the leader's newly energetic and lyrical compositions and interpretations, with the bassist's refined yet syncretized approach fitting the original arrangements like a glove, while the drummer traverses his kit without ever getting in the way.

The album begins with typical Skaff-ian energy: "Faith" aggressively moves forward, nicely paired with a strutting version of Monk's "Green Chimneys", followed by a Metheny-ish run up and down the fret board on "No Cover" and the funky swing of "Swerve". The pace begins to turn on "Peace Place", a waltzy, breezy affair that leads to "Reach Down Deep", a walking blues that the guitarist shines on. He sparkles on a solo rendition of Ellington's "Fleurette Africaine" (Skaff also played a group version on 2017's *Soulmation*) that could serve as a fine example of lyrical arrangement in self-accompaniment. Following this solo respite, the title cut replenishes the energy of the album as the trio engages in significant swing. "Southern Pacific" chugs along appropriately before the guitarist closes out the new album with another solo spotlight through a reprise of "Peace Place", not modifying the melody or rhythm significantly, but perhaps sending a message.

Greg Skaff isn't just a talented guitarist, he is a thoughtful, inventive artist that never proffers mere repetition. With his current trio on *Re Up*, the guitarist signifies a return to his "Peace Place" after all.

For more info visit [gregskaff.com](http://gregskaff.com). The album release concert is at The Django Sep. 1. See Calendar.



**April by April Varner**  
**April Varner (Cellar Music)**  
 by Anna Steegmann

April Varner, now 27, started taking piano lessons at six and classical voice lessons at eight in her hometown, Toledo, OH. She has performed regionally, nationally and internationally, making her Carnegie Hall debut at 16, and has been recognized for her achievements in numerous ways, including winning the International Ella Fitzgerald Jazz Vocal Competition (2023). *April*

by April Varner is her debut album of eleven songs, all with "April" in the title. Her talented collaborators are Caelan Cardello (piano, organ), Reuben Rogers (bass), Miguel Russell (drums), Benny Benack III (vocals, trumpet), Dayna Stephens (tenor) and the recently deceased Russell Malone (guitar), with guest Theo Bleckmann (vocals) who produced one track (Ulysses Owens, Jr. produced the majority of the album).

A deeply emotional and persuasive singer, Varner's voice is radiant, at times haunting, vulnerable yet always confident in its delivery, as well as masterful in improvisational scat and the art of vocalese. She makes every note count. Her singing comes to the fore throughout, especially the selections where just one instrumentalist accompanies her. For her composition "April Blues" (one of two originals), she is joined by Rogers, whose soulful playing complements her voice and accentuates her mature delivery and impeccable phrasing. Accompanied by Malone (in one of his final recordings), "April Come She Will" is a beautiful rendition of the Simon & Garfunkel song. The standard "April in Paris" (Vernon Duke, Yip Harburg), a swinging duo with Cardello, surprises with its fresh interpretation and the vocalist's inventive phrasing.

All her bandmates perform on "April Give Me One More Day" (Joe Shank, Paul James, Lou Singer). The track sounds vintage in the best way and contemporary at the same time. The liner notes praise Varner's phrasing, vowels and turns, akin to Anita O'Day's delivery of ballads. Stephens and Benack III contribute forcefully to this gorgeous track, making this song even more mesmerizing. Prince's "Sometimes It Snows in April" is outstanding and, at seven minutes, the longest track on the album. Its languid beginning and melancholy mood are enhanced by Russell's feathery drums, Cardello's heartfelt and tender piano, Rogers' expressive bass and the leader's sincere, luminous singing, all of which transform the composition into a dazzling jazz tune.

April Varner sounds like a seasoned pro, mature beyond her years, and unquestionably on the road to stardom.

For more info visit [cellarlive.com](http://cellarlive.com). Varner is at Winnie's Jazz Bar Sep. 7. See Calendar.



**Captured Alive**  
**Toots Thielemans (Choice-Candid)**  
 by Sophia Valera Heinecke

Before Toots Thielemans (1922-2016), the harmonica was largely far removed from the world of jazz, so much so that the Belgian Thielemans (whose eight-year deathaversary was last month) has been credited with legitimizing the instrument in the genre. This CD and LP reissue of *Captured Alive* (recorded in 1974, originally released by Choice) has been remastered and includes two additional bonus tracks.

Energizing at times and melancholy at others, the album showcases the abundant capabilities of the harmonica, even with its inherent limited pitch range (which Thielemans quickly makes it easy to forget on such tracks as "Airegin"). The staccato moments are followed by the harmonicist's aptitude for slides and spectrums. With his unique sound, Thielemans became a go-to for '60s film scores (*The Pawn Broker*, *Midnight Cowboy*), expertly escalating tensions and building suspense. The sweeping melancholy heard on "I Never Told You"

(from *That Cold Day in the Park*) is particularly cinematic and evokes a more traditional Americana aesthetic of harmonica playing that harkens to railroad travel and open fires. Along with Cecil McBee (bass) and Freddie Waits (drums), the young Joanne Brackeen (piano) adds a depth to the simplicity with low rhythmic moments and floating melodic lines. She is solid in creating the background on her original "Snooze" (the album closer), which is an uptempo piece with a hypnotic pianistic circular flow around the leader, who employs single sharp notes and chords that weave in and out.

It's been said that Thielemans was well-liked for his modesty and kind demeanor, yet he is self-described as a Brussels "ket" ("street kid" in slang). Perhaps this self-concept informed how he could see the unique fit in composing jazz for harmonica and bringing it to sophisticated compositions such as Coltrane's "Giant Steps". In the album's rendition, the leader opens, his solo fading into an inviting moment of silence before Brackeen steps in and the two subsequently offer moments of breathy tenderness that bring forth striking intimacy. Here and elsewhere, *Captured Alive* showcases superb harmonica/piano pairings, especially where one partner settles while the other is unsettling or when the collaboration adds a flavor of mystery, as in one of the bonus tracks, "Stella by Starlight". Here the leader starts by bringing mystery in atonal harmonica riffs while Brackeen's piano lines float, melodic and graceful. Towards the end, Thielemans holds bright, sustained notes to accompany light arpeggios, until the track fades out.

*Captured Alive* is a multidimensional offering sure to engage those both familiar or new to the harmonica as part of the ethos of jazz and blues.

For more info visit [candidrecords.com](http://candidrecords.com)

RECOMMENDED NEW RELEASES

- Sophie Agnel, John Edwards, Steve Noble – *Three On A Match* (Otoroku)
- Lakecia Benjamin – *Phoenix Reimagined (Live)* (Ropeadope)
- Raymond Burke – *The Southland Recordings (1958-1960)* (GHB)
- Matt Choboter – *Unburying, From Liminals, Emerging* (ILK Music)
- Emil de Waal – *Fire Øjne* (April)
- Sandy Evans – *The Running Tide* (s/r)
- Ingebrigt Håker Flaten's (Exit) Knarr – *Breezy* (Sonic Transmissions)
- Jason Kao Hwang – *Soliloquies* (True Sound)
- Tobias Klein, Frank Rosaly, Marta Warelis – *tendresse* (Relative Pitch)
- Joëlle Léandre – *Lifetime Rebel* (RogueArt)
- Lux Quartet (Myra Melford, Allison Miller, Dayna Stephens, Scott Colley) – *Tomorrowland* (Enja)
- William Parker, Cooper-Moore, Hamid Drake – *Heart Trio* (AUM Fidelity)
- Ken Peplowski – *Live at Mezzrow* (Cellar Music)
- Jerome Sabbagh – *Heart* (Analog Tone Factory)
- Angelica Sanchez, Barry Guy, Ramon López – *Live JAZZDOR* (Maya)
- Jason Stein – *Anchors* (TAO Forms)
- Colin Stetson – *The love it took to leave you* (Envision)
- Luke Stewart Silt Trio – *Unknown Rivers* (Pi Recordings)
- Natsuki Tamura/Satoko Fujii – *Aloft* (Libra)
- Papo Vazquez Mighty Pirates Troubadours – *Songs del Yucayeke* (Picaro)