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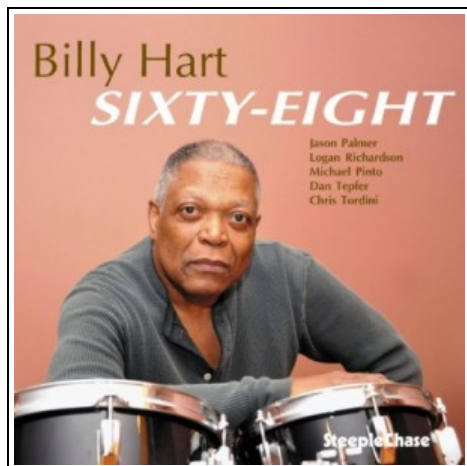
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On Billy Hart

This review appears in the May 2011 issue of [The New York City Jazz Record](#).

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Billy Hart, *Sixty-Eight*

(SteepleChase)

Brian Landrus Quartet, *Traverse*

(BlueLand)

Mads Vinding Trio, *Open Minds*

(Storyville)

By David R. Adler

At 70, Billy Hart is an icon of modern jazz drumming, and his work is far from done. Fueled by a restless creativity, he's taken a new class of younger artists under his wing, working with them in varied settings as both a leader and sideman. With three new CDs we get a snapshot of

his recent playing in sextet, quartet and trio formats. The recordings do him justice to varying degrees, but they all reveal a responsive and highly seasoned musicianship, a presence as energized as it is understated.

On *Sixty-Eight* we hear the drummer as leader: It is Hart's 68th appearance on a SteepleChase record date, and also his age at the time of this session. The focus is progressive early '60s repertory, and Hart's frontline players, trumpeter Jason Palmer and altoist Logan Richardson, bring a razor's-edge quality to the music. Unfortunately, pianist Dan Tepfer is swallowed up in the mix, and the blend of piano with Michael Pinto's vibraphone muddies the harmonic landscape — even if Tepfer and Pinto both play superbly throughout. Chris Tordini's bass ends up being one of the better-captured solo instruments.

If the production on *Sixty-Eight* is so-so, the music itself is strong. Hart brings an adventurous, firmly swinging drive to pieces by Eric Dolphy, Mal Waldron, Sam Rivers and Jaki Byard. He opens with Ornette Coleman's ethereal "What Reason" and also gives a platform to Tepfer and Palmer as composers: the former with the 20-bar blues "Punctuations," the latter with the ballad "That's Just Lovely" (which it is).

Traverse, a quartet disc from baritone saxophonist/bass clarinetist Brian Landrus, finds Hart in a support role alongside pianist Michael Cain and bassist Lonnie Plaxico. There's no sonic overcrowding here. The title track, co-composed by Landrus and Cain, is a flowing waltz that spotlights Hart's distinctively subtle accents and cross-rhythms. Hart is also busily unpredictable on "Lydian 4," Landrus's most striking original, and "Gnosis," another less notable Landrus/Cain creation in 12/8. As a horn stylist, Landrus is captivating, particularly unaccompanied on "Soul and Body" or in duo with Cain on "Lone" and "Soundwave." But the offerings on *Traverse* feel thin compared to Landrus's dynamic

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2009 release *Forward* (also featuring Cain, as well as Jason Palmer).

Danish bassist Mads Vinding had the good taste to hire Hart for *Open Minds*, a trio date featuring pianist Jean-Michel Pilc, and here yet another side of Hart emerges. Whereas *Sixty-Eight* and *Traverse* find Hart pushing the soloists with assertive tom-tom fills and such, *Open Minds* is a forum for Hart the minimalist. The session is not without fire, but Hart often deploys brushes and stays out of the way while Pilc does his deconstructive best. The menu includes standards such as “Someday My Prince Will Come,” “My Funny Valentine” and “How Deep Is the Ocean,” and if anyone can renew these old workhorses, Pilc can. The pianist’s constant departures from familiar scripts make this a more rewarding date than *True Story*, Pilc’s 2010 trio session with Hart and bassist Boris Kozlov.

Along with Vinding’s intriguing title track and Pilc’s “Golden Key,” Hart’s lyrical “Irah” is a welcome addition to *Open Minds* — calmer and more straightforward than the version on Hart’s 1993 album *Amethyst*, closer to his rendition with Ethan Iverson and Mark Turner on 2006’s *Quartet*. In any case, it’s ample proof of Hart’s fine melodic instinct and well-rounded artistry.

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