



Van Morrison. *Born to Sing: No Plan B.* Blue Note.

Van Morrison's first studio album since 2008's *Keep It Simple* marks his return to the Blue Note label (where he picked up a Grammy nomination for 2003's *What's Wrong with This Picture?*) and finds the pop and R&B singer and songwriter strolling on the jazzier side of street. Jazz is even referenced in "Goin' Down to Monte Carlo" on which Morrison complains about hearing "phony pseudo jazz" at a restaurant, and it's the subject of the swinging "Close Enough for Jazz." The heavy organ, prominent horn section, and Morrison's own sax playing, as well as his tight six-piece road band that backs him here, and especially Paul Moore's excellent bass work, lend more than a tinge of authentic jazz to the proceedings. Still, while *Born to Sing* signals Morrison's return to jazz and R&B, it's nowhere near as strong as 1995's Verve CD *How Long Has This Been Going On?* It peters out after the first five tracks as Morrison gets self-referential and starts preaching about the shortcomings of capitalism, the death of God, and shoddy news coverage. The strong traditional blues "Pagan Heart," the next to the last track, leaves you wishing for more of the same on this well-recorded CD. GC

Further Listening: Van Morrison: *How Long Has This Been Going On?; Pay the Devil*

Mark Knopfler: *Privateering.* Mercury.

Nearly 35 years into a recording career that began with the self-titled *Dire Straits* album, singer-songwriter-guitarist-producer Knopfler holds as steady on his course as such older baby-boom peers as Van Morrison, Eric Clapton, and J.J. Cale. He's amassed a boggling résumé of collaboration—Tina Turner, Bob Dylan, Chet Atkins, Steely Dan, Randy Newman, Buddy Guy, the Chieftains, Prince, and others—and soundtrack credits. However, on this 20-song double CD, his seventh solo studio recording, he narrows his focus to Celtic-inspired folk tunes and laid-back folk-rock and blues. If not particularly venturesome, it's all warmly satisfying. His eloquent, note-bending electric, acoustic, and slide guitar solos, and the locked-in grooves of his band (augmented by accordionist Phil Cunningham, fiddler John McCusker, whistle and pipes player Mike McGoldrick, harmonica ace Kim Wilson, and mandolinist Tim O'Brien) sumptuously support Knopfler's sleepy vocal rumble as he intones narratives drawn from legend, story-telling traditions, and his own experience on the road. The folk material is mystical and memorable; the blues more predictable and dispensable. The rather congealed mix de-emphasizes the supporting players, but forefronts Knopfler's comfortable singing and playing. Derk Richardson

Further Listening: MK and Emmylou Harris: *Real Live Roadrunning*

Hoff Ensemble: *Quiet Winter Night.* 2L (Blu-ray and LP).

Pick the wrong 30 seconds of this 2L release and you may wonder if you've wandered into Mannheim Steamroller Land. Fear not. Though this set of 15 short compositions by the Norwegian team of Geir Böhren and Bent Åserud, rendered by the Hoff Ensemble plus six singers, is clearly of the Jazz Lite stripe, the music is harmonically inventive and never cloying. The fact that the singing is in Norwegian and not translated anywhere probably helps. All the tracks are down-tempo and most ache with a minor-key Northern European melancholy, but nothing overstays its welcome. The entire program runs only about 50 minutes. The multichannel option faithfully reproduces the deployment of the musicians as documented in session photos and the liner note's diagrams. If the drums-to-the-rear thing is too much for you, the stereo version—everything is 24/192 HD—is naturally configured. Vocals are beautifully characterized and instrumental detail is stunning: listen to the expanding sound of a large cymbal struck with a soft mallet in "Dele alle ord og tanker." The LP is predictably wonderful (with better stereo imaging) though you're more likely to knock over your scented candle running over to lift the stylus from the run-out groove. Andrew Quint

Further Listening: Ana Caram: *Rio After Dark* (SACD)