

Nelson Foltz and Tom Lynn are the men behind the curtain for *Still Life*, a series of recordings of which this is Volume Three although actually the fourth in the series (there was a release entitled *Interlude* which came between Volume One and Volume Two). Sadly, this was the first one of the collection which I was fortunate enough to hear, although based on a little reading on the Internet, I gather they are all of a piece, even if they are dissimilar. Obviously, I thought highly enough of this album that I gave it a spot on my Best of 2008 listing, so you already know this review will be a rave.

Comprised of a single track nearly 44 minutes long, *Still Life Volume Three* (hereafter just *Volume Three*) moves patiently through several distinct movements, not unlike an ambient overture (although longer than your standard overture, obviously). What will most likely raise the eyebrows of some listeners is that no electronic instruments were used in making this music. Instead, found sounds (manipulated and altered through studio magic) and real instruments (notably trombone, played in a relaxed bluesy fashion) are melded, resulting in some of the most blissful yet somber and perhaps somewhat melancholic drone-type music I've heard in quite a while. In fact, this is one of those relatively rare ambient recordings that, as far as I'm concerned, you're going to enjoy more by immersing yourself in, although when played in the background it exemplifies what makes ambient music, well ambient (i.e. pleasantly ignorable but resonating with the listener on an unconscious level).

Volume Three is a quiet recording. Its charms may even sneak up on you. Things start off with a muted warm drone and soon other elements fade in gradually, musical tones with a reverberating quality, an occasional brief solo from the aforementioned trombone, and at about the two minute mark, the first emergence of a beat comes into play. It's organic in nature, heartbeat-like, and fades away quickly but emerges more pronounced later on. What sounds like orchestral string samples lend an air of beauty and sadness, mixing with the innate bluesiness of the horn, both of these being balanced by the unmistakable ambience of the drones and textures so that it all coalesces into a deeply felt yet never overbearing or overpowering auditory sensation.

Later, when the heartbeat rhythm becomes more prevalent, a radar-like blooping echo shares center stage, ping-ponging softly into the distance. It's at this point that I realized what a masterpiece Foltz and Lynn had crafted. To make music this "subtly" beautiful, this organic in feel, yet also obviously displaying the engineering know-how of the 21st century, well, it's mind-boggling, frankly. As I listened time after time, more background touches revealed themselves as layers of effects came and went, always adding something to the "whole." There is no waste here, nothing is superfluous. Despite all the "stuff" going on, what it really sounds like is a single musical entity, hence why I refer to it as organic (that and the fluid nature to the tones and drones and

textures).

The second half of the recording becomes more drifting, sometimes comparable to vintage spacemusic, featuring drones that are even warmer than the previous ones. The tones stretch out and change their sonic characteristics with near glacial patience. On their website, the artists use the terms "levitate" and "float" in describing this last passage and those are apt descriptors.

Throughout all its phases, Volume Three finds a way to introduce comfort and warmth in the music but never loses touch with the core ambient aesthetic. Foltz and Lynn have tapped into something very special on this disc. They have created an ambient music that resonates deeply with the listener but in a way that never really "points" to any emotion (i.e. the way dark ambient might elicit fear or foreboding). While I mention the terms somber and melancholic above, I'm using them to describe the music more than my reaction to it. If anything, this music pleases me to no end. I finish hearing it and feel content and at peace, yet intellectually stimulated and alert - quite the paradox. I can't imagine any self-professed fan of ambient music who wouldn't love this, unless that person so hated the occasional use of trombone that it would destroy any mood the music was attempting to establish in him/her. My highest recommendation.

Bill Binkelman for Wind and Wire

Nelson Foltz and Tom Lynn are studio musicians who have, we are told, "worked on more song-oriented projects." The Still Life series, though, sees them renouncing not only song, each of its four discs proudly bearing the legend "no electronic instruments were used in this recording". Foltz and Lynn bring a bunch of muso-cred to the table, mostly under an insipid shiny U.S. Music Industry banner, trailing communings with an array of mainstream worthies whose unpromisingly polished pedigree belies the considerable interest Still Life holds for the grittier experimental adventurer. For here they ditch the pre-packaged sheen of chain-store MOR togs and get naked for more questing sessions.

Their declaration of independence from electronics signals an admirable attempt "to bypass formulaic musical solutions and pursue a more adventurous context for instrumental expression." But this doesn't bode some kind of Back to Nature retreat of unsullied acoustics, of organic freedom from artifice. For all Foltz and Lynn's declared mission to explore quiet, slow music that is "organic in character as well as origin", the outcome manifests a character transcending origin. Note that the statement of electronic purity doesn't extend to the recording desk, where the subtle timbral tweakings apparent on these pieces were effected through post-production fairy dust. Still Life is

an apposite titling for this series, since it's all about low-motion unfolding tableaux, self-consciously exuding their nature tones into extended pieces of subtle revelations.

The trombone, an unwieldy instrument wont to blow an ill wind, in Foltz's hands becomes euphonic, pitching itself up close to Jon Hassell's processed trumpet keenings, and sometimes down towards Tom Heasley's tuba lowings. The internally themed Rothko-esque cover art of the Still Life series could stand as a semiotic of Foltz/Lynn's sound, with its slow-shifting tones that spread across a spartan canvas - ostensibly static swathes that reveal micro-variativity on deeper insertion. Though possessed of an internal homogeneity of approach across each instalment, individual albums manifest distinguishing traits.

The main strategy early on is the extended modal drone (think early Terry Riley or Pauline Oliveros), with Interlude, in particular, an hour-long stretch of chronostasis, being more 'environment tuning' backdrop than musical statement. Vol.1 takes this as departure point for further instrumental inflections. Percussion comes into its own as Vol.2's piece shifts to percolating ethno-groove, with Tibetan bowls, Armenian doudouk, even bowls of water enslaved to the rhythm. A plethora of sources, familiar and unfamiliar, are co-opted into sonorous communion, a hybrid that here nods discreetly at tribal ambient, while drawn more toward Fourth World's fetid embrace on Vol.3. Ultimately, its intoxicating pull towards genre is stayed by Foltz/Lynn's programmatic focus - that of creating panoramic aural landscapes that blur natural/man-made boundaries, configuring sonic space through dream device.

Alan Lockett for futhernoise.org

Still Life volume three (43'43") by Nelson Foltz + Tom Lynn blurs the borders between eastern drone, jazz and ambient music. One piece in three movements, Still Life sustains a mood of uneasy calm throughout its slow course. Murmuring drones resonate and howl against each other as a subtle rhythm gently propels this work. A probing lead melody mingles with then emerges out of the dronescape. With the quality of a muted horn the notes blow and snake through a dream of ancient rites, modern omens, and extant hope. Stepping out of the endless cycle of time as a voice from the now, the playing is lost in a sense of the present. Foltz + Lynn realize their music as they play it live, and are entirely taken over by the experience. Their Still Life series has risen out of a continual need for self-discovery - as they stumble around in the dark of themselves.

Chuck VanZyl - Star's End WXPN Philadelphia

Using only organic non-electronic instruments, Nelson Foltz and Tom Lynn have created a beautiful and introspective long form piece as the third volume in their Still Life series. Subtitled Berlin Winter 2007, the disc does a remarkable job of creating a unique environment through the use of acoustic instruments and other naturally occurring sounds.

Still Life:Volume 3 is a very full disc sonically, one where a variety of tones mingle and play around each other to form a dense space within a single long form work. Short drone-y sounds serve as a backdrop for the soundscape, though I'm at a loss to identify what their source is, a fact that makes them all

the more interesting as a result of their obscure origin. After the listener becomes acquainted with the soundscape of the work, a mournful trumpet can be heard suggesting late nights on dark and foggy streets. Soon water drums and echoing patterns can be heard to play throughout the piece, forming an irregular percussive pattern that takes the listener in a variety of directions, but never strays too far from the main space that's been created. As the disc progresses, new sounds and new tones are added to the soundscape, leading the listener along specific paths, allowing them to explore the space in greater detail, but always keeping them tethered to the same general location as if to suggest boundaries to the environment. Eventually one becomes so used to the way sounds mesh and mingle with each other, so accustomed to the shape of sounds, that silence and change becomes almost shocking to the listener. As the disc ends and the shape and form of the space created vanishes into nothingness, one can't help but feel wanting, hoping for a return to the world created over the course of the disc's length.

Needless to say, Still Life:Volume 3 is wonderful example of how natural elements can be manipulated and formed into a new space for reflection. In an era where so many artists rely on the use of electronics to convey ideas and environments, it's quite refreshing to hear something so rich and dense actually being played live by the artists. An impressive release by a very talented duo.

rik for ping things

Never before has there been a more unlikely pair ekeing out neo-ambient/drone music. Foltz has worked with, amongst others, Steely Dan, jazz drummer Tony Williams and Barry White; Lynn's cut his teeth on various film and theater sound productions, none of which have the slightest ties to patron saint Eno's inaugurated genre.

Irrelevant, nonetheless—the three volumes of Still Life (Interlude is made up of

elements of the first) combined represent some of the most brilliantly astute “ambient” recordings you’ll find this year, last year or otherwise. That the resultant sonic tapestries ebbing out of the digital “ether” can hold its own amongst the million other ambient recordings around is made more remarkable by the duo’s disclaimer that “no electronic instruments were used in these recordings.” What then is the generative source for these archly minimal yet rich tableaux? (Such conjecture remains the primary obstacle many a frustrated music scribe has to overcome, often in vain.) The muted chorale/mantra of voices (Dampened Tibetan monk chanting? Karnatic vocal scales? Echoplexed wordless Tuvian throat utterances?) caught in the vast sonar nets and fingered “pulses” of Volume One usher in pro forma, Westernized “contemplative” states, distant relatives to some of Terry Riley’s early organ drones or Pauline Oliveros’ processed accordion epics, though heaven help you if the words “new age” invade to deter your concentrating on this stuff. Deep listening of the Oliveros kind is more the requirement, which instantly negates Eno’s classic descriptor for this music, mostly for the better. Interlude’s molecular characteristics seem more apparent (the thrum of guitar, bent into elongated Budds and skeins of noise that crystallize out of a more refined Eno miasma), and though derived from Volume One’s structure (really, only that work’s central hum has survived intact) germinates out of the room’s very walls as it maintains its own even strength. Volume Two’s sound art is splayed over a Rothko-esque canvas of respirating, miniscule tones that become gradually subsumed into the white-on-white portraiture. Closest of the three volumes to Bernhard Günter’s pointillistic creations, the cumulative effect is like sunlight filtered through blinds, notes suspended in solution, refracted in shards of dustnote. Subtly felt, dazzling, and utterly essential.

Darren Bergstein, e/i Magazine / www.ei-mag.com

Nelson Foltz and Tom Lynn are studio musicians who have, we are told, “worked on more song-oriented projects.” On the Still Life series, of which this is the third volume, it seems they not only wanted to get away from song, but also from electronics. This by rights ought to disqualify Foltz and Lynn from entry to e/i for flagrant contravention of its strictly electronic dress code, but somehow they manage to make it in by dint of their music’s spirit. If not “electronic”, it’s certainly based on an ethic of conventional instruments unconventionally instrumentalized, rendering them “otherwise”. Foltz has apparently worked with S. Dan, A. Franklin, and R. Flack, to invoke but three signifiers of artistic worthiness, and Lynn comes trailing a further list of achievements in a similar sphere of un compelling music industry orthodoxy. Fortunately they leave their MOR credentials outside the room for these thankfully less polished, more exploratory sessions. Still Life is aptly titled, since it’s all about low-motion unfolding tableaux, self-consciously exuding their nature tones into three extended pieces of subtle revelations.

With the unpromising trombone, an instrument that traditionally blows an ill wind to these ears, Foltz takes a leaf out Hassell's book of altered trumpet states to possibilize its music, opening up its sound. He semi-solos semi-drifts across much of Still Life's contours—drawing together a hybrid of modal drone, ambient and jazz inflections. A plethora of unlikely sources from zithers to a half-filled bathtub were co-opted into sonorous communion on Still Life, now at Volume Three and still maintaining interest, the outcome tipping a discreet wink to tribal ambient while remaining aloof from the tired gestures of Fourth World imperialism.

Alan Lockett – e/i magazine

Nelson Foltz and Tom Lynn have created “a series of recordings (in) response to the extreme pace of modern life.” Their goal in creating Still Life was to remove the demands of ego, thus allowing the music to develop without an agenda. Indeed, the lack of an agenda gives this recording integrity, life and vision – each stronger than any agenda could provide.

This CD is definitely a labor of love. While Tom and Nelson used some traditional instruments – Tibetan bowls, trombone, douduk, bass clarinet, kalimba and udu – they also used poster tubes, wine glasses, a bath tub half full of water, a clock, a dripping faucet and several “household objects” in their sound design. They used no electronic instruments but they have processed the sounds and samples quite extensively.

This CD is one long-form (52”) composition that has its own definitive pattern. (It has no agenda.) Tom and Nelson allow the piece to morph along its own path as it builds from sparse minimalism to rhythmic ambience and back to sparse minimalism. Deep listeners will be able to follow the music as it wields its subtle overtones gently and lovingly. Nelson and Tom care about their listeners. They have not invested their egos in the music. They have invested their emotions, spirits and hearts. This is a labor of love.

This soundscape does take time and effort to appreciate, absorb and experience to its fullest extent. It is worth that and much more.

Jim Brenholtz

Organic ambience, whole, natural, beautiful...

Volume 2 of the Still Life series by Nelson Foltz and Tom Lynn is a fascinating work where ambient spaces are made through the exclusive use of acoustic instruments and

found objects. Rather than rely on electronic instruments, Foltz and Lynn fill out the soundfield with a variety of sounds and tones, all played live in a spontaneous and organic manner, mixed in such a way that the instruments are layered deep within a steady drift, combining together to make a living and breathing musical experience

The disc opens with the sound of drifting, an ebb and flow that stays with us throughout the first half of the disc, pulling the listener through the space that is being developed. As time passes the sounds of brass instruments begin to creep in, rising and falling throughout the piece, recognizable but muted, dreamy mirror reflections of their traditional selves. Around the nine minute mark a lone trumpet rises out of the soundscape, a focal point that draws us further into the work, deeper into the space. Shortly after that some sparse percussion begins, water drums, toms and more, creating a primal rhythm that further surrounds the listener.

Around the twenty minute mark, the sound becomes more lively, and the drift is replaced very slowly and subtly by a bell pattern that emerges, paired with steady percussion and trumpet work. I'm sure there are voices in here as well, but they exist so far on the edges of the soundfield that it's difficult to be sure. While the overall feeling at this point is a steady sound that repeats and loops on itself, careful examination reveals tiny but significant shifts in pattern and tone, maintaining interest and appeal for the listener, and building on the idea of the work as an evolving, organic creation.

Over the course of its length Still Life Volume 2 succeeds in creating a rich and beautiful environment for the listener to explore, a shimmering and beautiful work that flows and moves and exists through its own natural development. An excellent addition to the Still Life series and a testimony to the talents of Foltz and Lynn. Certainly if this disc is any indication of the quality of the other discs in this series, then you can be sure I'll be looking to add them all to my collection.

rik for ping things

Still Life is the duo Nelson Foltz and Tom Lynn, who state on the simple cd-cover that no electronic instruments were used in this recording. This seems to be their third album (formerly they made "Volume One" and "Interlude"), featuring a sound experience which doesn't emerge from silence but from every day life, as explained on their site www.still-life.org (where two soundbites of the album are available). What we've got here is an album with one uninterrupted track of 51 minutes, which can be classified as reflective, intelligent drone/soundscape music. Next to some slightly distorted sounds one also encounters airy textures. At the 14 minute mark some kalimba sounds enter stage, later on joined by more repetitive rhythmic structures,

trumpet and trombone which make the composition take shape. This is subconscious, trance-inducing and well-thought introspective mind music.

Bert Strolenberg

Outside of the fact that it's a very pleasant listen, the thing to understand about Foltz and Lynn's third installment in their Still Life series is that it, like the disks the preceded it, is crafted strictly from acoustic instruments and found or constructed sounds. There are no electronics here, and yet the feel is of a lush ambient recording that could just as easily issued forth from a bank of synthesizers. The journey begins under the power of Foltz's melancholy trombone, which to my ears pulls up memories of an old favorite of mine, Jon Hassel's "Surgeon of the Nightsky," with its slight avant-jazzy meanderings. Across its 45-minute length the music spreads, stretches and warms, evolving—or devolving, for that matter—into a brilliantly low-key and unobtrusive piece of work that gently prods the attention in places. It shifts subtly, elements smoothly swapping out to create new textures and ultimately paring back to a floating drone of gentle beauty. This CD doesn't end as much as it dissipates. Foltz and Lynn have set out to create music that quietly co-exists with the listener, and they've quite succeeded here. In fact, the highest praise I can give this third volume in the series is to say that it makes me want to hear all of what came before.

Hypnogogue

Ambient Music comes in many shades, and it is a green cast which permeates Still Life volume two (51'56") by Nelson Foltz + Tom Lynn. Their work creates an atmospheric journey through the emerald hued regions of Fourth World Music. An unguided tour, this shamanistic adventure provides nuanced yet detailed aural surroundings within which the listener may roam. The piece begins extremely softly with a sub-sonic drone beneath slowly breathing tones. Its development is nearly imperceptible as the airy notes continually layer up and gently recede. With spaced scales played on a kalimba, the rhythmic section is introduced and this long-form piece begins to take shape. The soundfield fills out with various hand drums and other native percussion devices playing together in pulsing lines. This intricate stratum of sounds began its origins in something other than a synthesizer or other electronic music device. However, once out in the air these waves are processed digitally. When Foltz's trombone blows are introduced it sounds as if the spirit of some lost tribe is trying to communicate with us. Processed and pitch shifted - and played in a style similar to that of trumpeters Jon Hassell or Nils Petter Molvaer - the horn tones are transformed into an eerie and breathy hybrid. Occasionally sliding between notes gives these solos a distinctive quality, as does the warm and fuller tone of this instrument. Still Life progresses to a more active point where all the elements come together in a slow cyber-dance ritual (the

calm beats and intermittent bassline of which continue to reverberate in our minds long after the piece winds down). Foltz and Lynn are artists working in the medium of sound, and in the dimension of time. The magic realism they have devised on Still Life bends time in the mystic ways of the ancients - a concept those of the First World need to recognize and incorporate.

Chuck van Zyl - STAR'S END

at play in the acoustic forest

Both Nelson Foltz and Tom Lynn are studio musicians who have worked on more song-oriented projects. But on the Still Life series, Nelson & Tom wanted to say something different in the increasingly cliched world of ambient music, and say it without any electronic instruments (or as Brian May used to write on the bottom of Queen records, "No synthesizers of any kind were used on this recording.") The main voice as the music starts is Nelson's trombone, which sounds like a cross between Jon Hassell's trumpet and Tom Heasley's tuba (Jon Hassell actually offered some informal assistance on this project, not bad karma to have when making an ambient recording.) Nelson solos throughout the first half of the CD, but hovers over the whole shebang. It's a great, Enossified performance - sure you can relegate it to the background, but you would be missing some of the most unique trombone playing around. I know Nelson can play standards if he wants to, but that is not what the Still Life series is about. As Nelson fades off, we get to hear ambient forest that had been background but now assumes prominence. The pair used everything from zithers to a half-filled bathtub to create their panoply of sounds. This is truly tribal ambience, not the Fourth World marching bands that permeate so many tribal ambient records, some by big names. This is also not your sanitized, elevator ambience that is sometimes played by musical novices for chiropractors' offices or yoga instructors: this is beautifully created, ambient music that works on many levels. I'm sure that like me, you'll be coming back for new discoveries with every listen. Very highly recommended, as is the entire, reasonably priced, Still Life series. This is a great way to start an ambient collection of your own.

Gordon Danis for CDBaby.com

Still Life, Volume 2

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This CD is definitely a labor of love. While Tom and Nelson used some traditional instruments – Tibetan bowls, trombone, douduk, bass clarinet, kalimba and udu – they also used poster tubes, wine glasses, a bath tub half full of water, a clock, a dripping faucet and several “household objects” in their sound design. They used no electronic instruments but they have processed the sounds and samples quite extensively.

This CD is one long-form (52”) composition that has its own definitive pattern. (It has no agenda.) Tom and Nelson allow the piece to morph along its own path.

Rigel Orionis for The Ambient Navigator

the Still Life projects are fantastic, vaporous, slow-shifting pieces of textural ambient minimalism.

Mike Griffin of hypnos.com

Elegantly simple packaging and music define the Still Life series, as evidenced on Volume Three. With glowing comments from Laurie Anderson, Jon Hassell, Pauline Oliveros and other prominent avant garde musicians, it is not surprising that this music falls more into that category than EM. In fact, the disc makes a point of stating that no electronic instruments were used. So the bouncing, amusing bass line is, in fact, a bass, or presumably something along those lines. The music definitely has an intellectual feel about it, like it is something to be studied before it can be fully grasped, taken in and appreciated. The sparse elements adhere to one another in a deceptively spartan manner, but basic does not necessarily equate to accessible. It is assembled with sounds that do not seem like a natural pairing, but one adapts to it fairly readily, or at least that was my experience on first listen. Familiarity breeds comfort as it goes, although there are subtle shifts throughout. The playful bass line eventually disappears, but not until over halfway through the lengthy piece. From there bright shimmering drones take over, becoming more minimalist than the preceding 25 minutes by quite a bit, which surprises somewhat because it didn't seem like there was that much to strip away from the overall sound. This is my favorite section of the disc right through to the end, probably just because it is more familiar to my ambient ears, but the entire disc has something highly positive to offer.

Phil Derby / Electroambient Space

In reviewing Volume Three of the Still Life series I mentioned the clean, elegant packaging. Well, this thin green-on-black envelope that is Still Life – Volume Two

managed to slip between other CDs to review and remain unnoticed for a year before I just rediscovered it this evening in November 2007. Foltz and Lynn have a unique style that is difficult to review, as long drones and abstract sounds slowly evolve over the course of any particular album. Though the approach is sonically quite similar on each Still Life release, each individual album nonetheless has characteristics rendering it a unique, worthwhile addition to the series. This volume starts with drones so resonant and deep that even on my PC speakers it threatens to overtake me from the rich bass vibration. It softens considerably later on, even adding some light touches of percussion. The duo proudly claims that no electronic instruments were used in the recording, and this one does sound less ambient than Volume Three, with more of a feel for the avant garde or perhaps even modern chamber music, with just a splash of jazz. Though technically not an electronic music release, EM fans with diverse tastes should find this quite enjoyable.

Phil Derby / Electroambient Space

While a herd of musicians is abandoning their instruments and moving en masse into the world of electronics, there are still a few acts that are sticking to their core values. Musicians Nelson Foltz and Tom Lynn created Still Life in order to get away from the chaos of everyday life. Their use of acoustic instruments along with modern recording techniques is key to the uniqueness of their records. On the back of their CDs, a simple statement is made, "no electronic instruments were used in this recording." True enough, the two concentrate on instruments such as trombones, bass clarinets but what weighs heavy in their program is the use of percussion. After a slow start, "Volume Two" establishes a coherent rhythm and stable pace that features modest use of percussion - Tibetan temple bowls, Armenian doudouk, even water inside of bowls is heard. The progression is slow at first, but as it builds momentum, it keeps you trapped in its mesmerizing glow. For just over fifty minutes, the two extract the best elements of world music, ambient methodology and minimal structure and make all pieces of the puzzle fit seamlessly. With echoes of Jon Hassell, Brian Eno and African percussive rhythms, the album takes the listener away on a journey of deep thought, concentrated music and freely flowing sounds.

Although somewhat more brief in length, "Volume Three" works along the same lines. First a calm start, with varied percussion thrown in for rhythmic development, which is then followed by various

muted and modified trumpets. The water bowls pop in and out of aural range to provide for dashes of colour, while other African percussion is heard from beginning to end. Drones are evident everywhere and a circular motion envelops the ears from every direction. This is sleep inducing music in the best sense of the word. Interesting enough to point out specific details but undaunted in its pure simplicity of wonder. Developing from a sense of mystery, *Still Life* pleases those who prefer music that is uninterrupted in its movement and heavily hushed to overcome harsh obstacles of life.

Tom Sekowski, gaz-eta magazine, Poland