Newport High School’s performance of “Pure Imagination” and tenor saxophonist Steve Treseler with Lynwood High School on “Like Someone in Love.”

Overall, this set is encouraging in the range of jazz styles, the discipline and cleanliness of the ensembles and the success of the student soloists. **Owen Cordle**

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**UNLV Jazz Studies Program**

**Smoke in Mirrors**

This ambitious double-disc collection showcases five different ensembles of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and while the number of contributions from each varies—seven tracks from Jazz Ensemble I, which leads it off, to a sole number from Jazz Ensemble II—the music is consistently strong from band to band. Jazz Ensemble I, directed by Dave Loeb and Nathan Tanouye, doesn’t waste time establishing its cred, with smart takes on Sonny Rollins’ “Doxy” and the standard “Bye Bye Blackbird,” the latter given a laidback but swinging arrangement by Carlos Mata-Alvarez that houses a robust solo from guest saxophonist Ed Calle. (Mata-Alvarez himself proves a more-than-capable saxophonist on the orchestral title track, penned by trumpeter Jorge Machain.)

The Contemporary Jazz Ensemble’s two tracks, both arranged by Tanouye, are less beholden to big-band conventions: Both “Bear Whisperer 3000” and “Her Story” feature the pianist Jason Corpuz (who also composed and arranged the latter) and take ample leeway with changes in tempo and harmony.

Things get lively real fast when the Latin Jazz Ensemble kicks off disc two with its five numbers. “3-4-1,” written by the band’s director, Uli Geissendoerfer, won a 2014 Independent Music Award for best Latin composition. Its tight opening knot of percussion, brass and piano gives way over its nine-minute course to well-defined solos from Machain, saxophonist Julian Tanaka and especially pianist Halsey Harkins; another highlight is the easygoing reading of Mongo Santamaría’s “Afro Blue.”

Jazz Ensemble II’s single cut, the even-tempered “Gone Without a Trace,” written and arranged by George Stone, is a stunner, full of dynamic twists and one brief-but-spellbinding solo by soprano saxophonist Jakob Yansen. Wrapping it is the Joe Williams Every Day Foundation Jazz Sextet, whose two tracks lean toward smooth-jazz and bop, respectively. The latter, “Handy Man,” a tribute to Joe Henderson, features some of the set’s strongest playing. Machain and Mata-Alvarez again out front.

**Jeff Tamarkin**

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**Manhattan School of Music Jazz Orchestra**

**The Symphonic Ellington**

Chalk one up for the acknowledgment, exploration and advancement of the worthy cause of Ellington in academic and institutional settings. With the fine live recording The Symphonic Ellington, the Manhattan School of Music Jazz Orchestra offers up an inspiring set of too-rarely heard larger-scale Ellington works circa the 1950s—chiefly “Night Creature,” The Queen’s Suite and the picturesque personal memoir “Harlem (A Tone Parallel to Harlem)—mixed in with a pair of Ellington-associated chestnuts, “Mood Indigo” and “Caravan,” in the lush, expanded ensemble palette of big-band with orchestral adornments.

Conducted by Justin DiCioccio and built on organic, sensitive transcriptions and arrangements by David Berger, The Symphonic Ellington gives vibrant form to music deserving wider recognition while also offering solid performances by plainly gifted young musicians. The academia-jazz pact has a logical subject in Ellington, a ripe example of the theory of jazz as “America’s classical music.”

Backstories illuminate the musical substance here. 1950s “Harlem” exerts its imaginative force while extending a wistful look back to Ellington’s Cotton Club era in ’20s Harlem, and the intriguing The Queen’s Suite (which Ellington penned with Billy Strayhorn) pays earnest tribute to his meeting Queen Elizabeth in 1958. “Night Creatures” poetizes nocturnal spirit (that all-important aspect of the jazz ethos) from many angles, with the insight of an inspired Ellington in 1955 and, 20 years later, folded into the choreographic world of Alvin Ailey.

One could quibble with here-and-there issues, such as the overly florid arrangement of the glorious tune “Single Petal of a Rose,” but the overall impression on this recording is one of intricate challenges met and respects paid to one of America’s great composers.

Themes of time and place, history and cultural alchemy play a strong conceptual role on ¡Qué Viva Harlem!, away from the inherent heat and impressive collective sound of the Manhattan School of Music Afro-Cuban Jazz Orchestra. Boldly led by Bobby Sanabria, as conductor, music director and percussionist in the ranks, the sterling student group travels down a path of roots investigation on this excellent album.

Opening, spicily, with “Mambo Infierno” and “Feeding the Chickens” (with a sassy trombone solo by Josh Holcomb), the sequence nods to the seminal influ-