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review by Ken Smith

Music as gritty and funky as Bill Ryan's seems to call for a new language to describe it; his eponymous composer-led ensemble, however, has roots traceable from the minimalist bands of Steve Reich and Philip Glass, through Duke Ellington, at least all the way back to Haydn's forces at the Esterhaza Court. In each case, the composer in question has relied heavily on musicians with similar sonorities swimming in their heads, and has often consciously written music with their specific abilities in mind.

One could hardly imagine a more talented and versatile group of collaborators than Ryan's Billband, whose collective credentials in new music and jazz as well as more disposable musical genres ensures an ensemble that can turn styles on a dime. One might say that Ryan's music constantly threatens to burst at the seams, were those seams not so artfully structured.

What keeps this group's debut collection constantly percolating is not merely the inspiration of the writing, but also the enthusiasm of the playing. Each track burns with all the visceral energy of a jam session, where musicians clearly feed off the energy of others and give back in hand. Rarely has music this earthy been so elegant, and not since the works of Elliott Carter (whose music Ryan's in no way resembles) has a composer fashioned so many facets of his own personality into what is obviously a conversation between musical characters. May Billband continue for many years to come.