

## CD Reviews - April 2013

by Tim Willcox

### The Art of The Big Band

#### ***Fall Down Seven, Stand Up Eight*; Steve Owen, composer and arranger.**

Composer/Arranger/Saxophonist Steve Owen is one of the Pacific NW's best kept secrets. Having spent the greater part of his career as the director of Jazz Studies at the University of Oregon, opportunities to hear his work are few and far between for those of us living outside the Eugene area. I've always been enamored with his large ensemble pieces. So when I received a copy of his debut album, "Stand Up Eight," I was enthralled. I could hardly wait to put the disc on the stereo, which I did within a matter of minutes. As it turns out, it's a work of pure beauty -- stunningly honest art performed at the highest level. The sonic quality of the recording is also amazing. You can hear the soul and breath of each instrument. Hopefully, "Stand Up Eight" will help put Owen's name on more people's radar.

The ensemble, which is comprised of a cast of great musicians from around the country (who all happen to be university level jazz educators). This recording not only serves as a conduit for Owen's immense talent and unique vision, it introduces us to some great musicians who might not have the high-profile of Joe Lovano or Kurt Rosenwinkle but are operating at the same artistic level, with a profound individual voice on their instrument (all while making a living at it!). The old prejudicial opinion about jazz educators sounding "mechanical" or "formulaic" has been smashed to bits and pieces by this ensemble. The American university has essentially become a new jazz scene, a place where great musicians congregate, innovations take place, and audiences go to listen.

The opening piano intro and wind ensemble chorale of "Fall Down Seven, Stand Up Eight" might have you believing you're listening to a work written by the love-child of Aaron Copeland and Maurice Ravel, before the rhythm section enters to remind you that this still might be a jazz album. After over five minutes of steadily growing intensity, it feels like the tune is coming to an end ... when suddenly we're greeted by Don Aliquo, a tenor saxophonist whom I had never heard before, but whose playing I immediately fell in love with. Aliquo builds an incredible solo over the next five minutes, a re-rendering of the intensity of the initial statement of the form. The tune tapers off into the initial feel-good groove until a final return to the chorale: the calm after the storm. It's this kind of drama which makes "Stand up Eight" stand out against a sea of other modern recordings, many of which have a certain homogenized sameness to them.

If there's one quality that ties all the music on this album together, it's Owen's patience when it comes to pacing his compositions and arrangements. The music is allowed to unfold in an organic manner, devoid of ego or cliches. The excellence and honesty of musicianship amongst the players only further enhances this ideal. The music throughout this recording conveys depth of emotion without ever sacrificing craft or ingenuity.

Though the level of ensemble playing on this recording is nearly unmatched in this day and age, none of the players are mere "section players." Each has a unique voice that is allowed to shine when it comes time for them to improvise. Saxophonists Peter Sommer, Todd DeGuidice, Will Swindler and Aliquo all contribute thoughtful, heartfelt and masterful solos. There are no imitators here. Trumpeter Brian McWhorter, known for his forays into contemporary classical music as well as cutting edge avant garde jazz, is given a moment to shine on the hilarious, if scary, "State Of The Union." That tune is, as Owen says in the liner notes, "My attempt to give a voice to the frustrations of the average, intelligent person striving to be heard over the din of @\$%^ parading as new and by a public unwilling to face reality."

Trumpeter Clay Jenkins (Eastman School of Music) is a modern master of the instrument. Once again, he might not be as well known as Tom Harrell or Wynton Marsalis, but Jenkins could hold his own on any stage with them. He gives us a gorgeous meditation on sound and space on Owen's "Still," a nod to Miles Davis' ability to frame music with silence. It's reminiscent of some of the freer music recorded by the ECM label during the mid 1970s. The time is so free and elastic (largely due to an ostinato guitar part played in a rubato fashion against the tempo), one might get the impression that the entire band is playing out of time. Jenkins continues to blow a hauntingly beautiful, expressionistic solo onward to the conclusion. The rhythm section here is the driving force behind the power and delicacy of this ensemble (I know it sounds like a Jaguar commercial...sorry). Together, these men propel the band through every possible feel: from the heavy metal Rage-Against-The-Machine angst of "State of The Union," to the heartfelt ballad-tribute from Owen to his father, entitled "Following in Your Footsteps," and to the Latin groove of the Jobim/Claire Fischer-influenced "A Delicate Balance." When the music is paired down to

soloist and rhythm section, you find yourself listening to a great small group where the members are conversing with one another.

Other tracks include a Thad Jones/ Bob Brookmeyer-like take on the Cole Porter's classic, "Everything I Love." Radiohead's "Kid A" gets a brand-new treatment here. And the thing I really enjoy about Owen's arrangement of "Kid A" is it's unexpectedness as a large ensemble cover-tune. Owen takes advantage of the original recording's focus on sound and timbre (relying heavily on the muted analog-synth-like sounds of the marimba here), more so than any melodic "hook" another more "obvious" song might have provided. "One Voice" is Owen's tribute to West African folkloric music, which again relies heavily on marimba and percussion to create an atmospheric sea for the rest of the band to sail upon.

It might not be economically feasible for a band of this size to tour the world, or even the US in today's economy, but hopefully Owen's music will make it's way around the globe through more recordings and performances by others. I could honestly write for days about how great this album is, but I'd run out of harddrive space. "Stand Up Eight" is so diverse and eclectic, you owe it to yourself to experience it uninterrupted, headphones on, cell phone and other gadgetry off, and your eyes closed. You'll find your ears traveling to a new place every time.

*Origin Records, 2012; approx time: 1.2 hours.*

### **Lush; The Joe Clark Big Band feat. Jeff Hamilton; Joe Clark, Arranger**

Another pleasant large-ensemble surprise this month is the new recording by Chicago arranger and composer Clark. He grew up in the burbs outside of The Windy City and made the move downtown as a college student at DePaul University. "Lush" not only serves as a vehicle to introduce us to Clark's arranging prowess, but also as an introduction to some of Chicago's finest instrumentalists who are probably not well known outside of that city. Los Angeles-based drummer Jeff Hamilton (known for his work with the legendary bassist, Ray Brown and his own Hamilton-Clayton big band), is a guest artist on the album, and he is as swinging and powerful as ever.

Chicago is known for both its traditional swing and bebop scene (Von Freeman, Gene Ammons, Benny Goodman, Johnny Griffin) as well as it's "outside" music scene (Art Ensemble of Chicago and the AACM). While this recording is mostly a tribute to the former, the more modern aspect of Chicago's contribution to jazz is allowed to shine at select moments, mostly through the whimsical improvisations of the band's stellar players.

The album's film-noir artwork also helps to give the listener an insight into the aesthetic Clark appears to have been going for while writing for this gorgeous album.

The CD starts off with a second-line version of Thelonious Monk's raucous standard, "Well You Needn't." Baritone saxophonist Mark Hiebert plays the first solo and reminds us that a few guys out there can really play their a\*# off on the most unforgiving of all the saxophones. After an equally swinging solo by trumpeter Victor Garcia, we are treated to a little bit of a Chicago blues "jump-style" chorus. We're reminded that Chicago is indeed a mecca for the blues, and not to ever forget it.

Clark's original, "Red Sky," is a modern, open waltz that introduces us to tenor Saxophonist Chris Madsen. He has a brawny Wayne Shorter-esque approach to tone, articulation and shaping phrases, but he also gives a nod to contemporary players such as Bob Mintzer, Rick Margitza and Chris Potter.

Madsen also gives us a rousing and inventive performance of Billy Strayhorn's "Lush Life" (possibly the greatest ballad ever written). Here, Madsen encapsulates the history of the saxophone from Lester Young, Johnny Hodges, Ben Webster and Paul Gonsalves to today's modern-day icons, while managing to bring his own voice to the equation.

On this particular track, you get a sense of just how deep Joe Clark's skills as an arranger are. It's at once a modern enhancement of the original, as well as a glowing tribute to the Ellington and Basie aesthetic of yesteryear.

The remainder of "Lush" continues in a similar vein, a kind of hybrid of "Basie and Sinatra at the Sands" meets Gordon Goodwin. All but one of the numbers, "Samba de Martelo," stays within the swing style. Hamilton continues to assert himself as a master of groove, while the rest of the band lives up his level of craftsmanship in both ensemble and improvisational solo work. Hard-swinging, delicate, and always musical and fun to listen to, this is a great introduction to an up and coming composer and arranger. Keep an eye and ear out for more projects from the fantastically talented young Clark.

*Jazzed Media, 2013; time: 52:04.*

### **Small Ensembles**

#### **Less is More; Rich Thompson, drums and bandleader.**

The Eastman School of Music's Thompson puts together a satisfying straight-ahead affair with "Less is More". Borrowing two members of Matt Wilson's "Arts and Crafts" ensemble (pianist and organist Gary Versace, an alumni of Eastman, as well as trumpeter Terell Stafford), the material does have some similarities with Wilson's modus operandi. A wonderful mix of Blue Note-era jazz standards and original contributions, "Less is More" is at once an homage to the past and summation of the current state of

straight-ahead jazz. Thompson is a fiery and communicative drummer, doling out bits of info for the other musicians to react to while at the same time he is a sensitive listener. His style skates somewhere between the bebop drumming of Max Roach and the 1960s expressionistic palate of Tony Williams.

Kenny Dorham's classic, "Lotus Blossom," receives an uptempo re-interpretation with both Stafford and Versace taking the helm with hard-swinging and energetic solos. Thompson's own "Hoot Gibson," a funky, Jimmy Smith-style original, features Versace on organ and is further evidence of the '60s Blue Note influence. The beautiful Rodgers and Hart title, "I Didn't Know What Time It Was" is performed in 5/4 and in a trio format with saxophonist Doug Stone (another Eastman staff member who appears on two of the album's ten tracks). Stone's dark, warm and airy tone is reminiscent of classic Sonny Rollins or Hank Mobley, as well as containing traces of Branford Marsalis' blunt attack. This is especially apparent on his hard-swinging solo on the album's closing title, Joe Henderson's "Step Lightly."

Bassist Jeff Campbell (yet another Eastman teacher!) holds forth throughout and contributes some wonderful solos. His sound is big and warm, with a natural non-amplified sound comparable to Dave Holland and Gary Peacock. Thompson and Campbell obviously have a history performing together, and they lay down a relaxed groove, even on up-tempo numbers. Nothing ever feels forced or out of control. Stafford and Versace sound as inspired as ever, playing masterful solos and lending their unique personalities to the recording.

Versace is an especially adept listener. His tasty comping provides the perfect answer to every question. He never seems to merely be playing the soloist's melodic or rhythmic ideas back at them, but instead takes the high road, finding the perfect counter to whatever is happening at the time. As an organist, Versace's playing is a fresh combination of old-school soul and new-school sonic experimentation. He is reaching for, and adding something new to, the modern library of organ sounds and timbres.

In terms of composition, the music on "Less is More" isn't breaking any new ground. But this album is highly recommended for anyone who enjoys the aesthetic of the classic Blue Note era. The music is performed with soul and humility. Even the great Ornette Coleman's usually frantic tune, "Invisible," receives a more down-home, straight-ahead performance. With an air of reserve, maturity and subtlety, "Less is More" lives up to its title.

*Origin Records, 2013; time: approx 58 mins.*

#### **Range of Motion; Jack Mouse Group, Jack Mouse, drums.**

Mouse is a veteran of the Chicago jazz scene. A quick gander at his bio reveals a sideman's dream. Mouse has spent decades performing with a who's who of jazz greats. His newest album is collection of 10 originals, mostly written by Mouse himself. His drum style lies somewhere between Shelly Manne, Paul Motian and Joe Morello. Loose, painterly and swinging are adjectives that come to mind on hearing him. His writing style is a smorgasbord, from swing and bebop to funk and the free jazz of the concluding number, "Loose Weave."

Saxophonist and multi-reedman Scott Robinson is a standout cast-member here, an obvious student of the Stan Getz school who is a curious mixture of that also includes Coltrane and modern day players such as Joe Lovano and Joe Henderson. With incredible facility, a beautiful tone and endless ideas, Robinson makes this album worthwhile on his own.

Guitarist John McClean, another Chicagoan, owes a lot to John Scofield (in terms of sound), but has his own vocabulary, teetering somewhere between Jim Hall, Pat Metheny, and the more straight ahead sounds of Grant Green.

The bass duty is shared between Kansas City's Bob Bowman and Chicago's Kelly Sill, two super-solid swinging gentlemen. Trumpeter Art Davis is also a lovely addition to the group, achieving a Chet Baker-esque blend with Robinson on the heads, and leaning towards Clark Terry's sound while soloing. Overall, a pretty straight-ahead outing and a strong recording.

*Origin Records, 2013; approx. time: 1 hour.*

#### **Tonada; Maria Marquez, vocals, arrangements.**

Marquez, the Venezuelan virtuoso singer, hasn't released an album since 2004's "Nature's Princess," and has spent the past four years working on "Tonada." It's an inventive album comprised of melodies derived from the Venezuelan folk tradition and influenced by the likes of Chick Corea, Weather Report, Wagner Tiso and The Fattoruso Brother, among others.

With a supporting cast too numerous to mention, the music on Tonada is an eclectic mix of everything from acoustic covers of traditional songs, such as "Maldicion (Damnation)," a beautiful waltz performed by voice, guitar and clarinet. This is "Tonada" at its bare core. At its more grandiose points, the album is a thick brushstroke of impressionistic orchestrations. Sonically, Marquez is a master at mixing the sounds of synthesizers with traditional acoustic instruments like the cuatro, accordion and even tabla. It even includes a DJ contributing on turntables on the title track. It all adds up to an ear-twisting and interesting product.

Marquez likes to layer her deep, soulful voice in close harmony, pulling off tightly woven and thick chorus-like parts. When singing melody solo, she has a rotund voice, reminiscent of Nina Simone and

Betty Carter. This is coupled with the ability to change colors, much like Milton Nascimento. She has a freedom with phrasing and a timbral control that only the best and most gifted singers have.

The horn writing on "Tonada" seems to draw inspiration from the cluster-y harmonies of Gil Evans and Joe Zawinul. "Sketches of Spain" and Wayne Shorter's "Native Dancer" come to mind at certain points.

"Tonada" is incredibly diverse, so much so that I'm having a hard time trying to find a category it might fit under. Marquez has taken her time making this album, and it shows in this lush, imaginative, and beautiful work. If you're a fan of eclectic Latin and World music, this will surely invigorate your ears. *Adventure Music, 2012; approx. time: 52 mins.*



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