



George Caldwell/ Bobby LaVell *Accord*

AMERICAN SHOWPLACE MUSIC 2938

★★★★★

Buffalo, New York, jazz mainstays George Caldwell, Bobby LaVell, Mike Forfia and John Bacon have crafted a spirited album effectively blending classics and originals.

While their takes on such Great American Songbook entries as “Yesterdays” and “All Of You” are comfortable, pianist Caldwell, tenor saxophonist LaVell, bassist Forfia and drummer Bacon hold their fire for originals, par-

Jeremy Cunningham Quartet *re: dawn (from far)*

EARS&EYES

★★★★½

Drummer Jeremy Cunningham has been a busy sideman since moving to Chicago in 2009, and his cachet rose markedly with his swinging support on recordings by rising-star local trumpeter Marquis Hill. In his debut as a leader, Cunningham keeps the Chicago pipeline flowing, rallying close comrades including bassist Matt Ulery, alto saxophonist Josh Johnson and guitarist Jeff Parker.

Cunningham has a loose, fluid touch and feel with a strong command of dynamics that, despite its “openness,” is tightly pegged in the groove. And that informs the whole band’s sound and concept.

Kicking off with “Bembé,” the band straddles an Afro-Cuban groove while Johnson unfurls solo phrases with elevating, ecstatic tension. Guest keyboardist Andrew Toombs offers a ’70s retro nod with the growl-edged bell tones of his Wurlitzer. In contrast, on the lovely ballad “far from,” the ensemble lets long tones and space speak volumes. “Constituent” is a loping, Monk-ish number that Cunningham propels with appropriate slinkiness. Parker

ticularly LaVell’s driving “My Love For John” (a sheets-of-sound homage to John Coltrane), Caldwell’s title track and LaVell’s smoking “Do You Believe.” The band also turns in nourishing versions of Monk’s “Bye-Ya”; “Elation,” an aspirational tune by Mulgrew Miller and Vincent Herring; and Herbie Hancock’s lovely “Dolphin Dance.”

While this is a traditional quartet—it’s been a long time since trading fours felt less clichéd and more exciting—it also can be edgy, eschewing tropes for drive in the originals.

The band knows how to build drama, and the more classical Caldwell and the more soulful LaVell are effective foils for each other. They’re so comfortable with each other that they know how to tell a story: “Like Someone In Love,” featuring Caldwell at his most assertive, is warm, narrative jazz. The sequencing, too, is effective, as “Elation” gives way to LaVell’s Coltrane homage and the sweep of “The Second Time Around” segues into the Porter closer.

Does this album blaze trails? No. Is it rewarding? Absolutely. *Accord* suggests a trip to Buffalo might lead to some jazz revelation.

—Carlo Wolff

Accord: Yesterdays; Double Take; Bye-Ya; Like Someone In Love; Dolphin Dance; My Love For John; Elation; Do You Believe; The Second Time Around; All Of You. (64:00)

Personnel: George Caldwell, piano; Bobby LaVell, tenor saxophone; Mike Forfia, bass; John Bacon, drums.

Ordering info: georgecaldwelljazz.com



pulls out a solo here that’s seemingly familiar but brimming with mischievous left turns.

The finale, “Visions” is purposely plodding, with Cunningham initially playing only bass drum downbeats and flammed backbeats. As the harmonies slowly expand, a fragile beauty emerges. The unit’s thoughtful soloing, rhythmic ease and attention to a rich, uncluttered ensemble sound reflects on Cunningham’s insightful leadership.

—Jeff Potter

re: dawn (from far): Bembé; Pulses; Leaves Rain; Ecliptic; far from; Constituent; Visions. (43:58)

Personnel: Jeremy Cunningham, drums; Jeff Parker, guitar; Matt Ulery, bass; Josh Johnson, alto saxophone; Dustin Laurenzi, tenor saxophone (3); Andrew Toombs, Wurlitzer (1), piano (4).

Ordering info: earsandeyesrecords.com



Chris Thile & Brad Mehldau *Chris Thile & Brad Mehldau*

NONESUCH 558771

★★★★★

From Jethro Burns to Vassar Clements to David Grisman, bluegrass musicians have demonstrated the strong links between indigenous Southern hill music and jazz. Since their first collaboration in 2011, mandolinist Chris Thile and pianist Brad Mehldau have explored that ground, too, with Mehldau’s attraction to harmonically rich pop music providing a strong bridge between the pair’s diverse backgrounds.

At the root of their connection is their mutual love of wringing every emotion from a song. On their virtuosic reworking of Gillian Welch’s Southern Gothic “Scarlet Town,” Thile employs muted strumming, slurs and rapid picking to provide stark contrast to Mehldau’s fulsome playing. Their take on Bob Dylan’s “Don’t Think Twice It’s Alright” is reminiscent of guitarist David Bromberg’s expressive interpretations of standard blues material, with Mehldau transforming Dylan’s original guitar line into a ragtime introduction and Thile inserting some wry phrasing into his vocals. Joni Mitchell’s early song “Marcie” allows Thile to move well beyond bluegrass, with a restrained vocal and mandolin accompaniment.

Aside from the consistently high level of musicianship here, the real strength of the recording is the way Thile and Mehldau plumb the roots of American folk music without sounding either nostalgic or reductionist. In their hands, all the material—whether it’s Elliott Smith’s “Independence Day” or Ruairi Dáil Ó Catháin’s 400-year-old “Tabhair Dom Do Lámh”—sounds completely contemporary.

—James Hale

Chris Thile & Brad Mehldau: Disc One: The Old Shade Tree; Burweeds; Scarlet Town; I Cover The Waterfront; Independence Day; Noise Machine (33:53). Disc Two: The Watcher; Daughter Of Eve; Marcie; Don’t Think Twice It’s Alright; Tabhair Dom Do Lam (29:58).

Personnel: Chris Thile, mandolin, vocals; Brad Mehldau, piano, vocals.

Ordering info: nonesuch.com