

# New Sounds

John Bunch

*John Bunch Solo: Arbors Piano Series at Mike's Place, Volume 1*

Arbors, ARCD 19184

John Bunch, solo piano

John Bunch is one of the last of the breed of two-handed piano players that roamed the earth in the days of Fats Waller and Teddy Wilson. Like them he stays relatively close to the melody and emphasizes swing. But he also brings a more modern sensibility to his playing. Complex harmonies suggest more subtle emotional nuances. In this regard it is not surprising that two of the songs on this disc are by Billy Strayhorn. Strayhorn wrote some of the most emotionally rich chords in modern music; check out what Bunch does with "Something to Live For" and "Isfahan."

Like fellow-pianists Dave McKenna and Walter Norris, Bunch can best be appreciated in a solo context. This is because the harmonic liberties he takes with his left hand would often not work with a bass playing the straight roots of the songs. Playing unaccompanied as he does on this disc, he can take your breath away with an ingenious twist on a familiar song.

Like all truly great artists, Bunch keeps his considerable technique harnessed to the task of moving his audience, never showing off what he can do merely to impress people. This is a rare treasure from a great talent.

by Robert Tate

Ted Curson

*Travelin' On*

Evidence ECD 22182-2

Ted Curson, trumpet, piccolo trumpet, fluegelhorn, vocal; Mark Gross, soprano and alto saxophone; Misako Kano, piano; Ray Drummond, bass; Sylvia Cuenca, drums, percussion

This music is personal to Ted Curson's playing and style, and the program displays the variety of musical areas he likes to get involved in. He is known as an experimental player, occasionally concerned with the Jazz avant-garde, but here he mixes bebop and Latin with jumping jive and New Orleans street music. It certainly seems as though this selection of music would suit an open-aired festival environment, but the talented efforts of Mark Gross and Misako Kano should not be overlooked, particu-

larly on the more esoteric pieces such as "Tears for Dolphy" and "Songs of the Lonely One."

One drawback seems to be with the recording mix where the Latin percussionists appear louder than the solo instruments. A tighter control by the producer may have given this CD more perspective and enhanced the final result.

by Al Merritt

Bob Dorough

*Right on My Way Home*

Blue Note 7243 8 57729

Bob Dorough, vocals and piano; Bill Takas, Christian McBride, bass; Grady Tate, Billy Hart, drums; Joe Lovano, soprano and tenor saxophones

If you're tired of the same old same old, sample this: a stylish and refreshingly imaginative session by singer-songwriter-pianist Bob Dorough and a company of enthusiastic companions who fashion good-natured music that is suffused with an abundance of charm and comprehension. Dorough, seventy-three, has long been known to a small but responsive coterie of Jazz aficionados as a connoisseur of the offbeat and far-out.

Although Dorough is undeniably the main cog in this wheel, its forward motion is greatly enhanced by the imposing presence (on five tracks) of Lovano, one of the most widely admired saxophonists in recent memory. As for Dorough's unvarnished vocal style, it is clearly his own, but he leans more toward Mose Allison or Jimmy Rowles than to Bobby Short or even Dave Frishberg. Dorough wrote "Up Jumped a Bird" and coauthored two other selections, the title track, and "Whatever Happened to Love Songs?" Bassist Takas contributed one of the more delightful numbers, "Zacherly," about a bear who finds his true love. Don Nelson contributes an earnest homage to Bechet, "Something for Sidney," on which Lovano sits in for the legendary clarinetist. Also on the menu are "Moon River," Nelson's "Walk On," "Spring Can Really Hang You Up the Most," and the forties novelty tune, "I Get the Neck of the Chicken." Dorough gives each of them a wonderful ride, singing and playing with a cheerful temperament that fairly leaps from his razor-sharp imagination to one's ears.

by Jack Bowers

Bill Easley Sextet

*Easley Said*

Evidence ECD 22183-2

Bill Easley, alto saxophone, clarinet, flute; George Coleman, tenor saxophone; Bill Mobley, trumpet, fluegelhorn; Donald Brown, piano; Ron Carter, bass; Billy Higgins, drums

Bill Easley is a "backroom boy" in the musical world, and on this, his first opportunity as a leader, he has put together an attractive package. His tone and style are reminiscent of the late Willie Smith as well as the venerable octogenarian Benny Carter. Among the plus factors are all-star personnel and some neat small band arrangements which help to provide a varied and entertaining selection of mainstream modern Jazz. George Coleman is quietly authoritative, and the rhythm section is as smooth as silk, but the surprise is the fine playing of Bill Mobley (relative of Hank?), who is completely new to me. A most enjoyable offering.

by Al Merritt

Richard Elliot

*Jumpin' Off*

Metro Blue 7243838251

Richard Elliot, tenor and alto saxophones with various personnel

Here's another of those glossy, pseudoromantic confections that should soon be coming to a lite Jazz radio station near you. *Jumpin' Off* has all the necessary ingredients: excessive reverb, tapa-tapa-thump! tapa-tapa-thump! three-beat rhythm, fully synthesized backup, new age sound effects, and the words "designed for maximum airplay" underlined in large bold letters across every track. Elliot and his amorphous supporting cast are competent enough; trouble is, the music they produce, while definitely lite, isn't really Jazz—at least, not in the sense that anything the least bit spontaneous is taking place. What we have is a series of rhythmic and melodic fragments above which float Elliot's buttery smooth and entirely predictable ruminations. Good enough for some, perhaps, but not for the more enlightened and demanding listener. The trouble with lite is that it's not only less filling, but far less satisfying as well.

by Jack Bowers

Chris Fagan

*Signs of Life*

Planet X 035

Chris Fagan, alto saxophone; Chuck Bergeron, bass; John Hansen, piano; Brian Kirk, drums

I've heard a number of big-name players with big-label recording contracts who didn't impress me nearly as much as Chris Fagan, whoever he is (we're given no more than his

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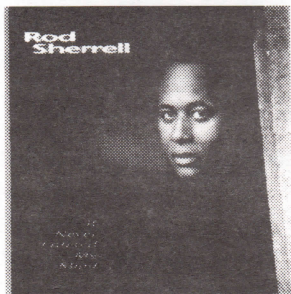


## New Sounds

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name on *Signs of Life* and the fact that the session was recorded in July 1997 in Los Angeles). In fact, the last alto saxophonist who caused me to sit up and take such emphatic notice was a youngster named Richie Cole (who sounds as if he could have been one of Fagan's role models, along with Phil Woods, Herb Geller, and other like-minded postboppers). Fagan is a fluent, discerning improviser with a clear and pleasing tone and enough technique to convey him easily through any tempo. The choice of material underscores his point of view with such Jazz staples as Clifford Brown's "Daahoud," George Shearing's "Conception," Cedar Walton's "Bolivia," and Benny Golson's "Whisper Not" augmented by a trio of venerable standards ("Night and Day," "Polka Dots and Moonbeams," "I Remember You"), two lesser-known originals (Sam Rivers's "Beatrice," Hank Mobley's "Xlento"), and one engaging composition by Fagan himself ("Blues with a Rub"). Fagan's supporting cast includes one of the West Coast's best and busiest bassists and two lesser-known but conspicuously accomplished players in Hansen and Kirk. We'll file this disc under P (for pleasant surprises) and hope that its success may lead Planet X to include in the next one a brief biography.

by Jack Bowers



### Rod Sherrell

#### *It Never Entered My Mind*

Ozmosis 0007

Rod Sherrell, vocals, background vocals; Vijay Iyer, piano; Pat Klobas, bass; Marlon Green, drums; Brian Kane, guitar; Rafael Ramirez, percussion; Dan Zarcione, bass; Alex Murzyn, saxophones; Elaine Lucia, background vocals

As there aren't a great number of up-and-coming young male Jazz vocalists on the scene today (Kurt Elling, Kevin Mahogany, Alan Harris, no more than a handful of others) creamy-voiced young tenor Rod Sherrell has a pretty wide-open arena in which to make his mark. He brings to the task at hand clean diction, steady intonation, an adequate range, and a generally credible understanding of the lyricist's purpose. Even so—and perhaps this is because he clings

so resolutely to the standard repertoire—one can't help but remember having heard most of these songs interpreted more winningly on other occasions. Sherrell can't compete, for example, with memories of Sinatra on "Nice and Easy," Nat Cole on "This Can't Be Love," Billie Holiday on "Stormy Blues," or any number of singers on "Imagination." Nor, one might argue, should he be required to. And yet the memories persist, and Sherrell, however high-minded and focused his ambition, simply can't live up to or overthrow them. Not at this stage in his development, anyway. He's a fairly respectable singer who has a long way to go before he acquires those indispensable qualities (as the liner notes declare he already has) that would make him "uniquely irresistible."

by Jack Bowers

*It Never Entered My Mind* is available through the *Jazz Now* Direct CD Store. See page 26 of this issue or call 1.800.840.0465.

### Willie Smith's Li'l' Big Band

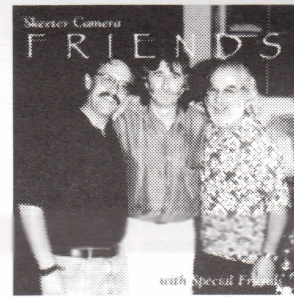
#### *Taste the Plum Mellow*

PCP 70137611392-8

Willie Smith, alto saxophone, piano (on "Lush Life"), arranger, with various personnel including Dan Maier, Rock Wehrmann, piano; Chink Stevenson, Dallas Coffey, bass; Ralph Jackson, drums; Rob Montgomery, trumpet; Chris Anderson, trombone; and others

First, the positives: Smith and his Cleveland-based colleagues can play, no doubt about that; and Smith's plainspoken compositions (six of which are enfolded here) are altogether respectable. Now, the negatives: timing on this disc, which is dedicated to the late pianist Carl "Ace" Carter and apparently benefits a worthy cause (Cleveland-area hunger centers) is less than thirty-five minutes, which these days easily qualifies as unacceptable. Neither positive nor negative: four vocals, two each by Marshal Baxter-Beckley (that's a she) and Leonard "Butch" Alexander. They're amiable, but no more than that. Inscrutable: the disc's juicy title, *Taste the Plum Mellow*. Smith, who takes the lion's share of the solos, is a sure-footed if derivative improviser who calls to mind Lou Donaldson, Sonny Criss, or perhaps Jackie McLean. He plays unaccompanied piano on Billy Strayhorn's "Lush Life," using block chords to underscore its dramatic premise. The other selection is the lone standard, Rodgers and Hart's "Falling in Love with Love," which is given a splendid reading by the band. There's some purposeful blowing on this date, but hardly enough to recommend it.

by Jack Bowers



### Skeeter Camera

#### *Friends with Special Friends*

Ruby Records, no serial number

Skeeter Camera, drums; Bill Fouty, bass; Terry Henry, piano; Randy Vincent, guitar; Don Weed, alto saxophone; Larry Baskett, trumpet, flugelhorn

The title of this CD says a lot about the music. It's what you hear when friends play together for the fun of it without a lot of exhibitionism. All are mature players with something to say about life and the chops to say it. They settle into a relaxed groove and explore the nuances of twelve songs. The first three feature just the trio on compositions by Terry Henry. Then the horns and guitar join in for a set of mostly standards. The pianist has a sure hand with melody and a chording style that keeps your attention with interesting rhythmic and harmonic variations. Saxophonist Don Weed goes back to the tradition before Bird and Trane to explore the emotional value of individual notes and turns of phrase. Larry Baskett plays flat-out beautiful melodies in a timeless style that owes nothing to the fads of the day. Guitarist Vincent, who often plays much farther out stuff than the others, is relatively laid back on this date, although he gets in a beautiful solo or two. And Skeeter, even though he is the leader, hardly takes a solo. He's the kind of drummer you feel more than hear until he drops a perfect fill into a rest that seems to have been carved out just for it.

This is the perfect CD for those who have tired of young lions showing off and enjoy listening to guys who know what they're doing, make each other sound good, and play fine music.

by Robert Tate

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### Cynthia Utterbach

#### *Close Your Eyes*

Birdland Records 3082

Cynthia Utterbach, vocals; Buggy Braune, piano; Jan-Peter Klöpfel, trumpet, flugelhorn; Frank Belle, tenor saxophone; Olaf Casimir,

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