



WILL FRIEDWALD, Jazz Critic, NEW YORK SUN on CLIFFHANGER by Larry Newcomb

Here I am, eating crow, and looking forward to a dish of humble pie for dessert. To explain: some musical trends develop slowly over the course of years or even decades; others seem to spring from nowhere and become firmly entrenched overnight. I can't remember ever having heard a jazz ensemble with a front line of guitar and tenor (except on a few choice classic recordings, like the Stan Getz – Jimmy Raney sessions). Then, in January of 2008, I attended two musical marathon events in one month, the annual Brooklyn Jazz Underground festival at Small's and the Knitting Factory Winter Festival. At both of these extended showcases for new bands, literally every other group was a quartet of tenor saxophone, guitar, bass, and drums. Like I say, I was barely aware that the format existed, and all of a sudden virtually every group I was suddenly hearing had the tenor-guitar frontline; the concept went from cutting edge to cliché in what seemed like a matter of moments.

It shouldn't be surprising: in the rock and roll era, guitarists far outnumber every other instrument, and though we should be glad that many of them aspire to play jazz as well as blues, rock, and folk, you still can't sneeze without knocking a few guitarists down, or even throw a rock over a wall without bopping one on the head. Apparently, many of these guitar-tenor groups work in alternative spaces where pianos fear to tread and there's barely even room for an electronic keyboard. It may be the curmudgeon in me talking, but by and large I don't approve of the guitar replacing the piano. Improvisation is difficult enough, even for a master, and you need all the harmonic and rhythmic support that you can get, and, for the most part, it's almost impossible for a guitar to do that as well as a piano. The guitar is a worthy supplement to the piano – the two worked brilliantly together in the great swing era rhythm sections – but with a few notable exceptions (Eddie Durham and Lester Young, Django Reinhardt and Rex Stewart) you wouldn't want to hear a guitarist replace the piano.

So here I am, listening to a new session by my friend, the guitarist Larry Newcomb, and eating a very large plate of crow. I was wrong; the guitar-tenor combination can be a wonderful one, in the right hands. If anything, the instrumentation is even sparer than most of the guitar-tenor quartets since Larry's group is a trio, co-starring tenor Saxophonist Mike Camoia and bassist Dmitri Kolesnik. There's no drummer, but you wouldn't notice it (honestly, the first time I played the CD through it never even occurred to me that there was no drummer). Keeping any kind of a tempo without a drummer is difficult, actually swinging without one is close to impossible.

What I like most about this album – particularly the opening romp through the chords and melodies of “It Could Happen to You” (and its bebop twin, “Fried Bananas”) – is the way Messer's Newcomb, Camoia, and Kolesnik swing out recklessly forward, as if they never got the memo that a swinging jazz combo has to have piano and drums, at the very least. They remind me of a Roadrunner cartoon where the coyote finds himself running off over a cliff but not actually falling until he gazes down and comes to the realization that there's no ground underneath him. As soon as the coyote looks down, he starts to plummet. Newcomb, Camoia, and Kolesnik never look down, and therefore they just keep right on swinging.

The trio gets wonderful momentum going on medium and up numbers like “The Line King,” the closer “Rollin' with Sonny” (I just realized the title is a pun on “Sonny Rollins”), the fast bop blues “Cliffhanger” and the no-less-intense jazz waltz “Sunday.” The faster pieces have a certain airy quality to



them – they’re not dense, hard-hitting, in-your-face type swing- or-else numbers, but rather they’re graceful and light (but never “lite”). They levitate like helium balloons because there’s nothing to hold them down, they are completely airborne, yet far from being frivolous trifles, they stay up in the air because they generate enough momentum – constantly hurtling forward - to remain aloft. I’m particularly impressed by the way Larry and Mike both support and interact with each other, at times one assumes the horn role and the other stays in the background, at times the other one does. The roles are equal; there’s no instrumental bias here.

Larry utilizes a wide variety of textures under the larger umbrella of “jazz guitar,” the term meaning a lot of things. Many of these are subtleties are almost beyond the notice of the non-guitar-playing listener; nonetheless, an important means of keeping the tracks sounding different from each other. And for complementing other extant jazz guitar recordings. Even if you don’t actually know the difference between, for instance, the steel- string flat-top acoustic (played by, among others, Larry Coryell, Pat Metheny and John McLaughlin) and the nylon-string acoustic (associated with Brazilian jazz guitarists and popularized, like so many things Brazilian, by Charlie Byrd, also played by Kenny Burrell), you will, in fact, feel the difference, even if it’s at a subliminal level.

Among Larry’s originals, two are clearly in song form: “Love So Fine” and “One Heart Ain’t As Good As Two” are written and phrased instrumentally in such a way that they sound like song-songs – you just know that words exist for these melodies, even if you don’t happen to be hearing them right at the present. “One Heart Ain’t As Good As Two” is a particularly catchy tune – I am looking forward to the time when I do get to hear the text.

Most of the 12 tunes are originals by Newcomb, plus Camoia’s dedication to two tenor giants, Mr. Rollins on “Rollin’” and John Coltrane on The Jazz Messiah’s lovely ballad, “Central Park West,” which commences with a hint of “Giant Steps” in the intro. There’s something incredibly pretty about the guitar-tenor combination, which, in the case of this tune, puts me in mind of Coltrane’s classic duet with Kenny Burrell on “Why Was I Born?” Camoia actually doesn’t sound anything like Coltrane did on the 1960 original (on Coltrane’s Sound), in fact, he introduced it using the soprano saxophone.

Still, I have a feeling that the two tracks I’m going to be playing the most are those of Larry playing three classic Songbook ballads, “Prelude To A Kiss,” which transitions into “My Romance,” and “Darn That Dream,” which is heard by itself. On the medley, Newcomb has, thoughtfully, actually employed Ellington’s “Prelude” as an actual prelude; he then transitions seamlessly into the Rodgers tune, which, in this context, becomes the musical equivalent of a kiss. Here and on Van Heusen’s “Darn That Dream,” Newcomb utilizes what he calls the “melody with chords” technique that he learned from Bucky Pizzarelli, one of the instrument’s semi-legendary masters of rhythm and melody. Larry’s playing here is sensitive but not sentimental, he keeps the emotions flowing without letting the time lag or the tune trail off into meaninglessness.

Those solo ballad tracks are my favorites, but the whole album is a delight. Eating crow never tasted so good. Could someone please pass the ketchup?

Will Friedwald