

52nd Street Jazz Review

by Don Williamson

Knoxville Jazz Orchestra

The Music of Donald Brown

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Time: 48

Rating: ****

One of the pleasures of business travel is the opportunity to hear music in various parts of the country. I have been surprised--nay, astounded--by some of the regional jazz groups in places as far flung as Dallas, Kansas City, Baltimore, Fort Lauderdale/Miami, Minneapolis, Syracuse, Las Vegas, Seattle, Indianapolis, Brattlesboro, Atlanta, St. Louis, Pittsburgh, and of course New Orleans and Philadelphia. Even here in Columbus, Ohio, the local jazz scene is vital and distinctive, ranging from organ circuit veteran Hank Marr to the surprisingly profitable Columbus Jazz Orchestra to electric violinist Chris Howes. Jazz listeners, of course, are aware of "the Kansas City sound" of the thirties. But a Kansas City sound continues in the persons of musicians like Fiddler Williams, Karrin Allyson, Todd Strait, Mike Metheny (Pat's brother), Jay McShann (still), Rod Fleeman, Kevin Mahogany and Bob Bowman.

My point is that even today, jazz exists on a regional basis in the United States. The sounds of those regional bands are quite different from one another, and they are exhilarating. Even though the listening public is led to believe that most jazz originates from the media and entertainment centers of New York, Chicago and Los Angeles, that perception is only partly true. It also arises from the improvisational energies of musicians in smaller jazz centers from coast to coast. Mostly, these pockets of jazz performance excellence occur in cities where universities are located, providing the instruction and performance venues for those who are learning the craft.

I shouldn't have been surprised at the high level of musicianship when I received for review *The Music Of Donald Brown* by the Knoxville Jazz Orchestra. One thing I've learned is to cast aside preconceptions when listening to any jazz group. Under the leadership of a Knoxville native who spent some time in Chicago as well, Vance Thompson, the Knoxville Jazz Orchestra sizzles with excitement as it performs his complex and engaging arrangements.

In other words, the Knoxville Jazz Orchestra--even though its first CD is self-produced and even though its members perform without pay--is of the highest caliber. Frankly, it rivals the output of some of the better-known jazz bands.

Knoxville native Donald Brown has written tunes for some of the leading jazz performers such as Donald Byrd, and he was an obvious choice as the fulcrum on which the recording is balanced. Even as the orchestra acknowledges Monk on "Waltz For Monk," Brown maintains an equilibrium throughout the piece by holding the performers in a $\frac{3}{4}$ meter, the light trombone lines sustaining the movement. "Waltz For Monk" ends with a big band fadeout, only to be followed by an upper-register piano dissonance and a surprising stringer from the trombone. While honoring the Thelonian genius of jazz, "Waltz For Monk" is really Brown's tune and Thompson's arrangement.

The same unexpected approach to tribute holds true for "The Thing About Harold Mabern." While one may listen in vain for a piano section referring to fellow Tennessee-states-man Mabern's style, it becomes clear that the composition truly honors Mabern instead of imitating him. Opening with clarinets, the tune's structure is based more on horizontal flow and atmosphere than in vamps or vertical and jagged accents.

For the sake of comparison, Thompson's arrangements bear a conceptual commonality with Maria Schneider's, the multifarious textures and shifting colors bearing more importance than the melody itself. Indeed, "The Thing About Harold Mabern" is built upon a two-note motif that evolves around the various sections of the band through effective use of dynamics.

While the evidence of the first number, "I Used To Think She Was Quiet," suggests that the trumpet section is the strongest, the varied arrangements of the succeeding tunes prove otherwise. *All* of the sections of the orchestra are equally strong. More importantly, they can execute with emotional flair the difficult original music that Brown and Thompson wrote.

Formed in August 1999, the Knoxville Jazz Orchestra plays with the cohesion of a unit that has been in existence for years, perhaps through their earlier work at the University of Tennessee. That implies that this orchestra consists of mature and technically outstanding musicians who understand the need to contribute to a total orchestral sound for effective results.

I do know this: The next time I'm in Knoxville, I'll definitely try to hear the Knoxville Jazz Orchestra perform live. I'm sure, from the evidence of *The Music Of Donald Brown*, that it would be a rewarding experience.

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