

Ulysses Owens Jr. (Criss Cross)
by Sean O'Connell

Ulysses Owens Jr., possessor of the mighty mythological name and mightier sense of swing, makes his bandleading debut with this album. To help him, he expertly employs a handful of his own employers as well as some of the sidemen who shared those dates. Owens is quoted in the liner notes discussing the importance of the Young Lions era: "There was a lot of great jazz during the '90s...even if people were trying different stuff, everyone's focus was still on swinging." And here Owens does just that with help from trumpeter Nicholas Payton, who contributes to slightly more than half the album, and bassist Christian McBride.

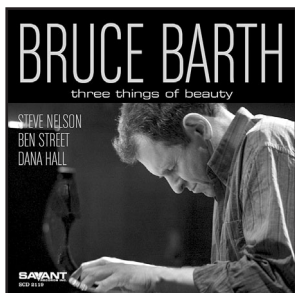
It is the latter's presence that is felt most heavily on this album. McBride has employed Owens for the last two years in his swinging trio alongside pianist Christian Sands, who appears here as well. It's been 18 years since McBride's debut as a leader and that album, *Gettin' To It*, has a lingering influence over *Unanimous* in its urgent sense of instrumentation and dedication to unapologetic swing.

The impeccable horn section (Payton, trombonist Michael Dease and saxophonist Jaleel Shaw) blast through the first two tunes. "Good and Terrible", a Dease original, is a ten-minute workout that introduces the bandmember through their well-constructed solos. "Con Alma", the ever-present Dizzy Gillespie standard, is grounded by Owens' splashing cymbals and lifted by Payton's soaring solo. Owens' lone original, "Beardom X", is a meditative tune that gets a fiery contribution from Shaw.

The album closes out with three trio selections. The years of working together are evident in the classic piano trio sound. McBride channels his best Ray Brown as Sands plops down a brief but brilliant solo on "You Make Me Feel So Young". "Cherokee" gets a murderous tempo and Owens' cymbals are a blur until the waltzing bridge cuts things in half. He and McBride trade blistering solos as both men compete to see who can ignite their instrument first.

These men are committed swingers and their sound is refreshing in a throwback way. Anyone concerned about the disappearance of straight swing need look no further than the final third of this album. The tradition is safe and still going places.

For more information, visit crisscrossjazz.com. Owens is at Smalls Jul. 4th with Michael Dease and Dizzy's Club Jul. 11th-15th with Christian McBride. See Calendar.



Three Things of Beauty
Bruce Barth (Savant)
by Matthew Kassel

The pianist Bruce Barth wrote six of the ten songs featured on his new album, including the title track, a

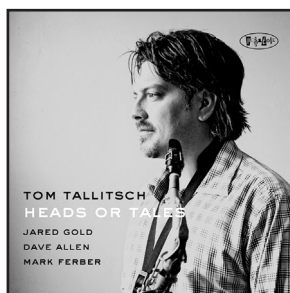
dream-like waltz more noteworthy for its long, lyrical, cascading solos than its melody. Most of the tracks on this album are like that, shaped by the drama of a soloist's decisions. In this case, Barth and the vibraphonist Steve Nelson make some really good ones.

They're backed by bassist Ben Street and drummer Dana Hall, who put down sure, swinging rhythms. The music is relatively straightahead, but it doesn't feel perfunctory nor do the musicians submit to the vice of jazz jam egalitarianism. This means that Nelson and Barth act as arbiters, in the forefront. (Street takes two short solos by this reviewer's count while Hall is featured once toward the end of the second track, "Final Push", a Barth original.)

Barth and Nelson make good partners; they don't serve as foils to one another but rather as soloistic compatriots. Nelson lets the sound of his vibraphone radiate out and he evokes equal parts Milt Jackson and Cal Tjader. Barth seems to possess the strongest attachment to the blues but he's not too gutbucket about it; he won't knock the wind out of you. In "Wise Charlie's Blues" (which Barth wrote for his friend Charlie Weiner, not Charlie Parker), he unspools a refined and sensitive essay that could easily have contained a lot of glib expression.

The last track is played by Barth and Nelson as a duo. The song begins in medias res: Nelson jumps straight into a brisk solo over a long progression of driving chords put down by Barth. Lyrical exchanges ensue. It's not exactly clear what the tune is until the last minute: "The Song Is You".

For more information, visit jazzdepot.com. Barth is at Smoke Jul. 13th-14th. See Calendar.



Heads or Tales
Tom Tallitsch (Posi-Tone)
by Donald Elfman

On *Heads or Tales*, saxist Tom Tallitsch looks at the tenor-and-organ quartet format and, with the help of very simpatico musicians, finds new things to say. The sound of this type of group is now part of the standard jazz catalogue and it's to Tallitsch's great credit that he makes us feel both comforted and challenged.

The tunes showcase the leader's virile tenor, both as a solo vehicle and in lovely combination with his cohorts. On "Coming Around", the album's opener, the saxophone drops right in and wails a sinewy but defined theme that snakes and swings at a rapid clip. Tallitsch takes a nice, muscular chorus that smartly pulls at the edges of the head. The tale continues with guitarist Dave Allen digging into the changes and being both lyrical and angular. Next, it's the organist's turn and Jared Gold reminds us how terrific it is to have this instrument still in the game and making vital and pointed solo statements. Drummer Mark Ferber, who has pulsed his way over and under the other soloists, takes a brief but volcanic solo to lead us back to the quick restatement of the theme.

One would think that this combination of instruments could sound somewhat monolithic, but the players care about colors and keep these themes fluid. "Dunes" is an airy tune, ballad-like but also dancing and forward-moving. Tallitsch, though his sound and tone is 'hard', finds a way to sing through his horn, working from top to bottom.

A surprise closes this recording. It's Neil Young's

"Don't Let it Bring You Down" and it's a lovely, emotional jazz ballad that's both invested in the original tune and making it breathe differently. Tallitsch is in charge here and his saxophone lushly delivers the melody with subtle underpinnings in segments from the others. The track is just a little longer than three minutes, but Tallitsch takes a fully realized solo and then takes the tune out in a sort of cadenza that riffs on at first but then quietly ends a cappella. It's a lovely way to bring to a close these very musical proceedings.

For more information, visit posi-tone.com. Tallitsch is at Bar Next Door Jul. 14th and The Garage Jul. 26th. See Calendar.

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