

Lee Konitz

Insight

JAZZWERKSTATT 116

★★★★½

Culled from five German live dates that happened between 1989–1995, and previously available on three out-of-print albums released by West Wind, the performances on *Insight* offer yet another strong reinforcement of the unique genius of Lee Konitz. Most of the tracks here were made with German pianist Frank Wunsch, an able foil for the saxophonist, but not a particularly striking voice on his own. Luckily, that doesn't matter when he's got a musician like Konitz beside him.

The collection opens with three fantastic solo sax pieces (although the title track is just over a minute in length), with Konitz characteristically digging deep into those original themes with a mix of tart humor and renewably fresh phrasing; his beautifully sere tone articulates high-modernist ideas, forever sprung from bebop but always seeking new ways to shape each improvisation. When writing about Konitz it's practically become a cliché to say that his playing meticulously avoids clichés, but a fact is a fact. The reedist adapts perfectly to the moody tone and melody of Wunsch's "Echoes D'Eric Satie," but elsewhere he's clearly dictating things, kicking off many of the pieces with probing solo intros. Whether dealing with a few standards or his own original workhorses, Konitz continually finds something new to say.

—Peter Margasak

Insight: Thingin'; Three Of Four; Insight; Frankly Speaking; Fortune Part I & II; It's You; Echoes D'Eric Satie; I Love You; Starlight Variation. (41:47)
Personnel: Lee Konitz, alto saxophone, Frank Wunsch, piano.
Ordering info: jazzwerkstatt.eu



The Claudia Quintet +1

What Is The Beautiful?

CUNEIFORM 327

★★★★½

John Hollenbeck continues to astound as a composer, prone to value accessibility as much he does adventure, on the fascinating *What Is The Beautiful?* As on the previous Claudia Quintet disc, *Royal Toast*, Hollenbeck extends the lineup with a "+1." But it's sort of misleading; it should read "+3," because in addition to Matt Mitchell, who takes over the piano chair left by Gary Versace, vocalists Theo Bleckmann and Kurt Elling contribute invaluable.

The singers play a crucial role on this album, because it's Kenneth Patchen's pioneering poetry that serves as its launching pad. Patchen's legacy adds another level of intrigue, given his relative obscurity. But his prescient works paved the way for the Beat generation and of the fusion of jazz and poetry. Commissioned by the University of Rochester as part of an exhibition commemorating what would have been Patchen's 100th birthday, Hollenbeck recruited Elling to read some of Patchen's work before he composed the music. Hints of overdubs are remarkably absent, because the ensemble couches Elling's recitations beautifully—as on the opening "Showtime/23rd Street Runs Into Heaven," on which Drew Gress' emphatic bass shadow dances in perfect unison to Elling's effective reading. As Gress' bass lines develop into a bouncy swing alongside Hollenbeck's streamlined yet propulsive drumming, Mitchell and vibraphonist coalesce intertwining lines underneath the voice before saxophonist Speed then later accordionist Ted Reichman comes in to reprise the parallel dance as Gress, Mitchell and Moran did prior. The overall effect is mesmerizing.

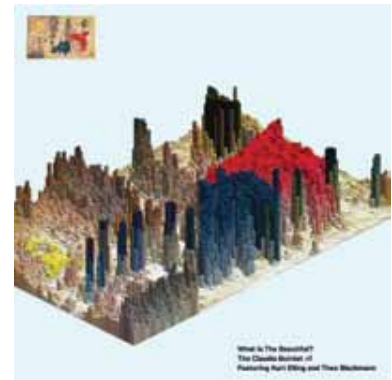
Elling's gift for interpreting spoken word is made all the more apparent in his ability to affect different characters. On "Showtime," he genuinely sounds like an old-school television voiceover talent and on "Opening the Window," his deliberate, slightly slurred delivery deftly evokes the craggy, inebriated shut in of the poem's protagonist. His most gripping performance is on "The Bloodhounds" (originally titled "Nice Day For A Lynching") on which he expresses the horrors of watching a black man being lynched amongst a gaggle of laughing white men.

On other occasions, Patchen's prose comes to life via Bleckmann's ethereal singing. Bleckmann is particularly bewitching on "The Snow Is Deep On The Ground" on which his otherworldly crooning is swept afloat by the rolling, counterpointing melodies and rhythms of piano, vibraphone, accordion and bass. Bleckmann finds an emotional gateway on "Do Me That Love" and on "Limpidity Of Silences." Bleckmann shows his flair for extreme dynamics as he whispers the words at an excruciating pianissimo without losing its rhythmic vitality.

While Hollenbeck employs virtuoso drumming in full service of his compositions, a closer listen reveals him to be a sparkling rhythmic engine, capable of driving the ensemble with supple grace. His drumming gets plenty spotlight however on "Mates For Life," on which his shuffling brush work duets magically with Moran's prancing improvisational lines.

—John Murph

What Is The Beautiful?: Showtime/23rd Street Runs Into Heaven; The Snow Is Deep On The Ground; Mates For Life; Job; Do Me That Love; Flock; What Is The Beautiful?; Beautiful You Are; Peace Of Green; The Bloodhounds; Limpidity Of Silences; Opening The Window. (66:17)
Personnel: John Hollenbeck, drums, percussion, keyboards; Ted Reichman, accordion; Chris Speed, clarinet and tenor saxophone; Matt Moran, vibraphone; Drew Gress, acoustic bass; Matt Mitchell, piano; Kurt Elling, voice (1, 4, 7, 10, 12); Theo Bleckmann, voice (2, 5, 8, 11).
Ordering info: cuneiformrecords.com



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"He almost smokes the strings off his guitar in a shocking display of electric fretboard mayhem."
—DAVE RUBIN

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