

Dylan Jack Quartet  
*Winter Panes*

Following up its Nosferatu-themed silent film adventure and live concert experience *Eine Quartett des Grauens* (2023), the Dylan Jack Quartet could have gone any number of directions. Half-jokingly, the Massachusetts-based drummer calls the group's fifth release, *Winter Panes*, a "holiday album." It is the first DJQ album to feature no original music.

The impetus was an invite: on a recent tour, one venue asked the group back for a holiday concert. Jack and DJQ stalwarts Jerry Sabatini (trumpet), Eric Hofbauer (guitar/effects) and Tony Leva (double bass) began to brainstorm "less common ways of looking at the winter landscape," the drummer recalls.

Feeling the cold took no imagination: "We recorded in January," Jack says. "It was cold as hell that day. It was, like, two degrees the next day. It was *so* cold. We recorded in a church, and when I walked up the stairs, there was this window outside, just covered in ice, so beautiful, with a chandelier hanging above it. I took a picture and it just had to be the album cover. Then I thought about naming the album after this picture in some way, with different cultures representing these different panes. If you look out this window, you might see the more eastern side of it, maybe, but it's still the same landscape no matter what—part of this bigger, larger window."

The first two DJQ albums, *Diagrams* (2017) and *The Tale of the Twelve-Foot Man* (2020), documented Jack's emerging compositional voice and established a sonic signature for the band. Hofbauer's full-bodied, close-miked guitar sparks vibrant exchange with Sabatini's horn (or Todd Brunel's reeds on *Diagrams*), a setting in which Leva and Jack are free to weave in and out rhythmically and texturally. Any instrument might offer an extended solo passage or split off into duos (akin to the space Hofbauer and Jack explored on their 2019 duo release *Remains of Echoes*). Hofbauer deepens his idiosyncratic approach to electronic effects on *Winter Panes* as well, foregrounding an acoustic tone while triggering dramatic echo and fuzztone timbres that seem to lurk in the shadows.

Peering through the first pane, we encounter "New Africa," by the late Grachan Moncur III, in a pedal tone-based, viscerally grooving DJQ treatment with Sabatini spitting fire in an almost post-bop vein. Jack's point of reference is the version from Archie Shepp's *Kwanza*, recorded for Impulse! in 1968-69, released in 1974. "I was struck by how *Kwanza* was not necessarily a Kwanzaa record," Jack explains, "and yet it embodied this idea of community with the sound of this really unusual big band."

James Brown's "Santa Claus Go Straight to the Ghetto" is a Hofbauer choice, a staple in the guitarist's house come holiday time. ("Tell 'em James Brown sent you," the Godfather of Soul exhorts old St. Nick on the 1968 original.) The DJQ's version is infectiously playful, driven by Jack's locked-in groove under a swinging ostinato bass figure, muted trumpet background riff, and wah-wah from Hofbauer on the main melody. Sabatini is in fine form on his leadoff solo, followed by Hofbauer's authoritative statement, more tonally based than "New Africa" but just as fresh and rhythmically inventive.

Along with the Moncur piece, Jack brought in a rhythmically skewed version of Vince Guaraldi's "Skating" from *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, and a tight arrangement of "Marley and Marley," the big Statler & Waldorf number from *A Muppet Christmas Carol* (a seasonal must-watch in Jack's household). Sabatini's lead playing is Bubber Miley-esque, supported by Hofbauer in a role split between accompanist and co-soloist, all animated by Leva in rock-solid accord with Jack's supple, improvisational beat.

"Skating" is in three, but Jack's arrangement layers four on top, "a polymeter going over the bar line," he explains. "I was thinking about how I might skate a little less, uh, glamorously than if the melody were nice and smooth. I wanted it to feel almost jolting." The poise and invention in Jack's 3/4 swing feel is the common thread, with riveting solos from Hofbauer, Leva, Sabatini and Jack in turn.

"Las Mañanitas" (the beloved mornings), a Mexican cultural staple sung on birthdays, Mother's Day and other occasions, was adapted by Herb Alpert and the Tijuana Brass for a 1968 release simply titled *Christmas Album*. Sabatini's arrangement, one of three for *Winter Panes*, jettisons orchestral bells and soft-rock beat for something brighter and merrier, with an extended solo guitar intro and a spirited round of Hofbauer/Jack trading with Leva solidly keeping time.

Sabatini also chose the Ladino-language "Ocho Kandelikas," a Sephardic Hanukkah number, slow and stately at first, with a declaratory trumpet intro rich in melodic ornamentation. After Leva's solo the lively tango feel comes to a pregnant pause, and . . . let the gradual and ultimately frenetic *accelerando* begin, in the authentic Jewish celebratory style.

The versatility on display is striking, not least on the traditional "Rise Up, Shepherd, and Follow," another Sabatini pick, which closes the album in rousing major-key spirits, with some of the tastiest, folkier guitar language from Hofbauer to date. Across idioms and traditions, Jack and his cohort meet the music on their own terms. "Maybe we sold out?" the drummer quipped in an initial exchange about this "holiday album," one unlike any other, stretching musical parameters while keeping the song in the forefront. What's not to love?

– David R. Adler