

HEROES JOHN ELLIS

John Ellis devoted his previous Blue Room Music outing, Bizet: Carmen in Jazz, to spirited adaptations and arrangements from that renowned late-19th-century opera. For the follow-up, Heroes, the acclaimed saxophonist and multi-reedist shifts focus back to original music: a program of eight compositions inspired in various ways by mentors, legends, friends, family—"heroes" broadly defined.

Pianist Gary Versace and bassist Reuben Rogers, longtime Ellis collaborators who played with characteristic beauty on the Bizet recording, remain in the fold here, joining the extraordinary trumpeter Michael Rodriguez (SFJazz Collective) and the in-demand Kush Abadey (Melissa Aldana, Ethan Iverson) on drums. The lineup in some ways echoes that of Rodriguez's own 2021 quintet release, Pathways, which also featured Ellis and Versace.

Ellis embraced the challenge of working in this classic quintet idiom, his first musical love. "I'm 50 years old now," he says, "and this is the music that got me, that made me want to play jazz for a living. And yet most of the things I've done as a leader are not so directly in this vein." He's alluding, for instance, to genre-defying larger group projects such as The Ice Siren and MOBRO, or the sousaphone-driven Double Wide, which featured Versace on organ. Consider his work as well with Rudy Royston, Alan Ferber, Darcy James Argue, Kendrick Scott, Helen Sung, Michael Leonhart and other major jazz composers of our time: Ellis has explored many musical worlds, yet the sax/trumpet quintet model endures in his imagination, impelling him and the band toward a broad and swinging lyricism. A rural North Carolina native, Ellis came of age musically in New Orleans, so those experiences inform the tenorist's writing as well.

Speaking of the tenor: Ellis is a proficient doubler, mastering bass clarinet, excelling on soprano sax, even ocarina, and yet Heroes is a tenor showcase straight through. Rodriguez, however, gets roughly equal solo and lead melody room on the album. There's a fullness in the Ellis-Rodriguez unison sound, in the way they blend this music's lush harmonies, almost conjuring the illusion of a larger band.

"Slingshot," in a propulsive 5/4, leads off with an evocation of the tale of David and Goliath. Yet there's more: "This is a tune written on a tune that was written on a tune," Ellis reveals. "One of Michael's mentors in Florida is pianist Ron Miller, who has a song called 'Small Feats' which is a reharmonization of Coltrane's 'Giant Steps.' I took 'Small Feats' and wrote another song based on Ron's chords." The appearance of Goliath—a giant—in this non-linear Coltrane tribute is no coincidence.

"Beautiful Day," which alludes to "It's a beautiful day in the neighborhood," is a callback of sorts to Ellis's 2012 release It's You I Like, which was comprised largely of songs by Fred Rogers, the innovative and sorely missed children's TV host. This swinging original has boppish modulations and an atmosphere perhaps akin to Sonny Rollins, Hank Mobley or the recently departed Benny Golson. The fact that Fred Rogers was an ordained Presbyterian minister is relevant: "These are the people I came from," Ellis declares. "My father was a Presbyterian minister, my mom's father, and it goes back farther than that. So everything about Mr. Rogers really resonates. On this song I pretty much steal some of his theme song and take it someplace else."

"Three Jewels," "Fort Worth" and "Color Wheel" are musician-specific tributes. The first, also for Coltrane, touches on Buddhism as well as the Trinity, while "Fort Worth" (not to be confused with Joe Lovano's song of that name) gives it up to Ornette Coleman and Dewey Redman, both sons of Texas. "Color Wheel" is for Bill Evans and takes inspiration from "Blue in Green." On that classic piece from Kind of Blue, the soloists expand and compress the harmonic rhythm to create interest, Ellis notes. "I love that idea. So on 'Color Wheel' Gary and I solo over the same chords but he has twice as much time on each one."

"El Cid," "Linus and the Lyre" and "Other Saints" come at the Heroes theme from different angles. The first is named for the medieval Castilian ruler Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar (subject of the 1961 epic film El Cid starring Charlton Heston and Sophia Loren). "Linus and the Lyre" references the Greek Heracles legend, in particular a scene right out of Tarantino where young Heracles slays the great music teacher Linus using a lyre as a weapon. "I guess it's a dedication to all music teachers," quips Ellis.

The closing "Other Saints" evokes not only Ellis's former NOLA stomping ground but the Caribbean as a whole (St. Barts, St. Croix, St. Kitts, of course the Sonny Rollins-linked St. Thomas, where Reuben Rogers is from). The loping beat, somewhat akin to Al Foster's famous "Fungii Mama" feel from Blue Mitchell's 1964 The Thing to Do, sparks a round of incisive tenor/trumpet trading, followed by eloquent full-fledged solos by Versace and Rogers. "I mean, who could be bigger heroes than saints?" asks Ellis. "We make saints, right?" Sonny Rollins, in the view of many including Ellis, certainly qualifies. "Other Saints," while it channels that Newkian spirit, also makes plain the qualities that have set John Ellis apart, from his earliest days on the New York scene to the here and now.

—David R. Adler