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- 1 **Bird, Bird, Bluebird** 5:41
Korean Traditional
- 2 **Imjin River Song** 6:26
Seyong Park
- 3 **Half Moon** 4:38
Geukyoung Yoon
- 4 **Doraji Taryeong (White Mountain Flower)** 6:21
Korean Traditional
- 5 **Arirang Alone** 3:53
Han Dol
- 6 **Spring in My Hometown** 3:47
Nanpa Hong
- 7 **Arirang Alone** 5:45
Han Dol
- 8 **Half Moon** 4:36
Yoon Geuk Young

JORDAN VANHEMERT SAXOPHONE RODNEY WHITAKER BASS DAVID ALVAREZ III DRUMS
SHARON CHO VOCALS (3,7) LISA SUNG PIANO (3,7) NATHAN BORTON GUITAR (3)
JOHN WEBBER BASS (3) MAX COLLEY III DRUMS (3) JEFF SHOUP DRUMS (7)

All arrangements by Jordan VanHemert



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JORDAN VANHEMERT NOMADS



JORDAN VANHEMERT
NOMADS

RODNEY WHITAKER DAVID ALVAREZ III



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When you listen to tenor saxophonist Jordan VanHemert dealing on a standard tune in a trio setting—the format heard on the majority of Nomad, his auspicious sophomore album—there’s no mistaking his fluency in the jazz tradition and on the horn itself. His sound is full and warm, with unhurried phrasing anchored in a swinging melodicism perfectly suited for high-level exploration of the jazz canon. But on this special date, mainly with the eminent Rodney Whitaker on bass and David Alvarez III on drums, VanHemert looks to a less common source for repertoire, the folk and children’s songs of Korea, both ancient and contemporary.

Currently the Director of Jazz Studies at Columbus State University’s Schwab School of Music in Georgia, VanHemert declares: “This record is about me respecting two traditions, jazz and Black American Music and the tradition of Korean music as well.” Drawing on the inspiration of his Korean American background, VanHemert aims to “sing” these songs, so familiar to Koreans, on the horn much in the manner that he would render a Tin Pan Alley classic. Whitaker and Alvarez are right there with him, guiding these melodies along with an elastic sense of swing and a deep knowledge of jazz’s limitless interpretive capacity.

Sadly, we still live in a time when cultural respect, curiosity and even simple decency cannot be taken for granted. VanHemert’s previous album, *I Am Not a Virus* (his full-length debut, with a quintet), dealt head-on with the reality of anti-Asian hate crimes and prejudice, which rose sharply in the States during the pandemic. On that album VanHemert offered an interpretation of the Korean folk song “Bonjo Arirang,” not to be confused with “Holo Arirang” a.k.a. “Arirang Alone,” which he includes here on *Nomad*. The “Arirang” on *I Am Not a Virus* conjured a somewhat stormy feeling; this one is calmer, seeming to pick up where the balladic outro of the first one left off.

Interestingly, *Nomad* includes both instrumental and

vocal versions of **Holo Arirang** and the Korean children’s song **Half Moon**, enabling VanHemert to showcase the marvelous singing of Sharon Cho and the eloquent pianism of Lisa Sung. “Lisa and I played ‘Half Moon’ on our first gig together,” VanHemert recalls. “This version is a direct tribute to her and to her father who recently passed away.”

VanHemert notes that elements of Korean culture “have permeated the US and our lexicon, not the least of which are Squid Game and K-pop. A lot of my students are really into BTS, and I love that.” As for Korean folk music and American jazz, the encounter might have begun with bassist and bebop legend Oscar Pettiford, who chanced to hear “Bonjo Arirang” during the Korean War and brought it back to the States as “Ah-Dee-Dong Blues” in 1952 (playing cello on the track alongside Charles Mingus and Ellly Taylor). In 2019, veteran alto saxophonist Jim Snidero offered *Project K*, featuring his quintet with Dave Douglas alongside Do Leon Kim on the *gayagum* (12-string plucked lute). Big-band composer and Busan native Jihye Lee has garnered acclaim for her two releases to date, *April* and *Daring Mind*, capturing the untranslatable spirit of han in her distinctive take on orchestral jazz. “Han is a uniquely Korean word reflecting a generational pain that stems from Japanese occupation that is built into our DNA and language,” VanHemert explains, characterizing his own work as a manifestation of han as well.

“When I wrote these arrangements, I wasn’t paying a lot of attention to my harmonic knowledge,” VanHemert says. “I really focused on the emotions and the storytelling, because to me that’s honoring the tradition of panson, the beautiful and emotive style of Korean singing. Panson is traditionally performed by one singer accompanied by one drummer — it’s very raw and intimate, which I wanted to reflect in the choice of a chordless trio featuring saxophone.”

In that sound one hears echoes of Sonny Rollins’ late ‘50s

trio sets with Pettiford and Max Roach (Freedom Suite) or Ray Brown and Shelly Manne (Way Out West), an influence VanHemert happily acknowledges. “Melodically speaking, Sonny to me is a really good parallel to a lot of this Korean music. The openness of that trio sound strikes me as similar to panson.” Rollins also enjoyed veering off the beaten track for repertoire, playing “Way Out West.” “There’s No Business Like Show Business,” “Some Enchanted Evening” and other numbers seldom played by jazz improvisers before or since. “To me it speaks about his treatment of the melody,” VanHemert remarks. “What I wanted was to respect the melodic tradition of these songs.”

Having partners on the order of Whitaker and Alvarez made these plainspoken lyrical melodies ring out all the more. “It’s hard to go wrong with Rodney,” VanHemert enthuses. “Being in the studio with him was a dream. I wrote the instrumental arrangement of ‘Half Moon’ thinking precisely about how Rodney and David would sound together, with David’s background playing with Benny Green and the Clayton Brothers and the incredible feel of Rodney’s quarter note.” Whitaker enthuses similarly of VanHemert: “Jordan has a powerful voice on saxophone, finding his voice through the study of jazz and its tradition, yet telling his story through the lens of his Korean cultural traditions.”

On the traditional song **Spring in My Hometown**, VanHemert and Whitaker have at it as a duo, with trading exchanges at the top that highlight the conversational nature of this art form. “I love playing with bass players and some of my earliest gigs were in that duo setting,” says VanHemert. “I was also listening to Walter Smith’s record two, his duo with Christian McBride on (Gig Gryce’s) ‘Social Call,’ which is so simple and swinging. Rodney’s playing is grounded yet there’s so much bounce in it. This is such a nostalgic happy song and I thought we could bring that out best as a duo.” That hunch was well-founded. VanHemert states the melody

in a relaxed legato and then lifts off when Whitaker begins to walk in four. After playing the melody out, the duo lingers on a pedal-point vamp before ending without a final resolution.

Imjin River Song was written, strangely enough, by a South Korean defector to the North. The lyric speaks longingly of “my hometown in the South / can’t go even if I want to / flow of the Imjin River / do you flow carrying my wish?” “The last line is this image of the fields as a sea of flowers dancing like the waves, the flow of the Imjin River cannot be divided. It’s really fascinating and I love this metaphor. Musically my inspiration for this was the bolero. I was thinking about the Afro-Cuban musicians that I’ve worked with and grown up hearing and wanted to acknowledge that as a really important cultural aspect of the jazz tradition.” Alvarez’s hand drumming on the track is meant specifically to evoke the sound of the *janguu*, an hourglass-shaped drum frequently played in Korea on New Year’s Day.

VanHemert’s lilting AABA waltz treatment of **Doraji Taryeong**, a folk song about a white mountain flower indigenous to Korea, elicits two strong tenor choruses, with spiraling double-time passages that still manage to convey the tenderness of the song. Whitaker solos as well, against the gentlest drum accompaniment, a particularly fine snapshot of this rhythm section’s chemistry. “The speaker in the poem is so proud of their basket, the harvest of these flowers. I wanted to include something happy. It’s a reminder to me that when we talk about Korea it’s important to consider the whole. Like any other place, there are struggles, and then there are also these beautiful flowers.”

The influence of John Coltrane is palpably felt on **Bird, Bird, Bluebird** (“Seya Seya Parang Seya”), which is usually sung as a lullaby. Pertaining to the failed Donghak Peasant Revolution of the late 19th century, the song is quite dark, notes VanHemert, paraphrasing a line, “Don’t sit on the green

beans or the farmer will mess you up!” “I thought it would be fitting to take something so simple and adapt it, which Trane did a lot,” he adds. “I’m thinking of how ‘Follow the Drinking Gourd’ appears in ‘Song of the Underground Railroad’ [on *The Complete Africa/Bress Sessions*]. Coltrane’s Sound also had a big impact on me. In this trio, in a melodic frame of reference, one of the things I wanted to embrace was that concept of searching that Trane embodies.” The trio undertakes that search together, with VanHemert setting the mood unaccompanied up front and ending with a brief tenor cadenza and declamatory final chord. The referent of Impulse-era Trane is clear, and yet VanHemert strives to make every gesture in his own voice.

There’s a rotating cast of fine players on the two vocal tracks: John Webber, who recently moved to Grand Rapids, a pillar of bands led by Johnny Griffin, Jimmy Cobb and many other greats, plays bass on **Half Moon**, with drummer Max Colley III, guitarist Nathan Borton and pianist Sung expertly framing Cho’s resonant vocal. Jeff Shoup hops ably onboard to play drums on the vocal of **Arirang Alone**. With their broader pianistic sonic canvases, and more explicit move toward the aesthetic of the pansonri voice, these tracks deepen the sense of Nomad as a journey, “wandering and weaving through the story of our complex relationships with being Korean American,” VanHemert muses. “There is joy, there is sorrow (han), and through it all, there is the authenticity of the Asian American experience.” We can add: there is also an authoritative sound, a refined bandleader instinct, and penetrating musical intelligence at work here, an artistic temperament that makes VanHemert’s story one worth closely following.

David R. Adler

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