

CHARLIE HADEN/JIM HALL
Charle Haden/Jim Hall

Impulse! B002176502 (CD). 2014. Jean-Philippe Allard, project supervisor; Jay Newland, editing, audio restoration. AAD? TT: 76:04

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★

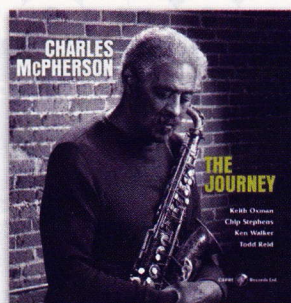
SONICS ★★★★★

In the discographies of Charlie Haden and Jim Hall, duos loom large. Sessions with Pat Metheny, Keith Jarrett, Ron Carter, Bill Evans, Hank Jones, and Kenny Barron spring to mind. Now comes this essential, pristine-sounding live date from 1990, at the Montreal Jazz Festival. The tunes are a mix of standards and originals, allowing for endless invention and convivial swing. The bittersweet timing of the release of this vault recording, so soon after the deaths of both jazz giants, makes it all the more a treasure.

It's often assumed that duos are dialed-down, whisper-quiet, even light-weight affairs, but the rock-solid time feel and depth of attack apparent in "Bemsha Swing," the Thelonious Monk classic that opens the set, puts that notion to rest. Haden and Hall speak Monk's harmonic language with a loose fluency that startles on every chorus.

The ballads are as astonishing. Hall burrows deep inside the minor-key Haden vehicle "First Song," quotes Coleman Hawkins ingeniously in "Body and Soul," and works up to a stunning cadenza in "Skylark." He uses the guitar expansively: chording in rich parallel patterns, picking deep-toned single notes, strumming breezily in his own "Down from Antigua," activating a chorus pedal in "Big Blues" and other tracks.

In his liner notes, pianist and prolific blogger Ethan Iverson traces Haden's and Hall's interconnected histories and muses on their brilliance as a duo. By 1990 they were hardened veterans who were still fresh and youthful in their approaches, somehow balancing limitless freedom and unerring accuracy in a dialogue that will never die. —David R. Adler



CHARLES MCPHERSON
The Journey

Charles McPherson, alto saxophone; Keith Oxman, tenor saxophone; Chip Stephens, piano; Ken Walker, bass; Todd Reid, drums

Capri 74136-2 (CD). 2015. Thomas C. Burns, Keith Oxman, Chip Stephens, prods.; Colin Bricker, eng. DDD. TT: 55:33

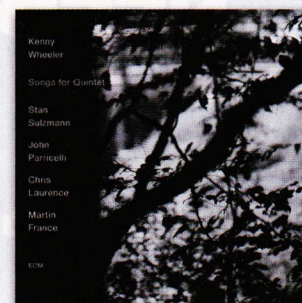
PERFORMANCE ★★★★★

SONICS ★★★★★

Best known for his dozen years with Charles Mingus, septuagenarian Charles McPherson performs in a more conservative post-bop style than Mingus did; he can evoke Charlie Parker so faithfully that he was chosen to play the supplemental alto-sax parts in Clint Eastwood's Parker biopic, *Bird*. Here, with four Denver-based journeymen, he bops brightly through a set of sleekly arranged originals by himself and his sidemen, plus one Parker tune and two standards.

The session resulted from a Denver meeting between the Detroit-bred, San Diego-based McPherson and Keith Oxman, whose tenor sax so closely resembles McPherson's alto that, often, only the difference in register distinguishes them. The two harmonize in a bopped-up take on the Rodgers and Hart ballad "Spring Is Here," and in McPherson's straight-ahead ballad "Manhattan Nocturne"; they trade fours in Parker's "Au Privave," and Oxman alone is heard on his own "Tami's Tune." Bassist Ken Walker is self-effacingly supportive, while pianist Chip Stephens and drummer Todd Reid lend a more modern feel.

Two ballads, Oxman's "Elena" and the standard "I Should Care," showcase McPherson's burnished lyricism and Stephens's harmonic sophistication. All in all, it's an impressive effort—vividly conceived, technically accomplished, and performed with admirable ensemble empathy—but there's no cutting edge, no original vision; only a highly polished execution of conventional ideas. —Larry Birnbaum



KENNY WHEELER
Songs for Quintet

Kenny Wheeler, flugelhorn; Stan Sulzmann, tenor saxophone; John Parricelli, guitar; Chris Laurence, double bass; Martin France, drums

ECM 2388 (CD). 2015. Manfred Eicher, Steve Lake, prods.; Andrew Dudman, eng. DDD. TT: 52:14

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★

SONICS ★★★★★

Kenny Wheeler died last September. This, his final recording, was released on what would have been his 85th birthday. Always, he set the exquisite sorrow of his flugelhorn tone against elliptically playful compositions. The result was wry, bittersweet, unsentimental, deeply felt—even his occasional flubs seemed stumbled on with impeccable taste. Wheeler's compositions often uncoil through a sinuous chromaticism as slyly deadpan as it is melancholy; "Jigsaw" is a prime example. Wheeler ruminates over a light, loosely sprung rhythm with dense but delicate drumming by Martin France, as John Parricelli comps more sensitively than any electric guitarist since John Abercrombie (another sometime Wheeler collaborator). Wheeler lets Parricelli state the head solo, but it's mainly a feature for Stan Sulzmann, whose long, clear, lonely tenor-sax lines are lyricism embodied—at the end, the sour unison of his and Wheeler's horns as the leader reclaims the tune is palate-twistingly pungent. "Pretty Liddle Waltz" is misnamed—the merely pretty was never so beautiful. The soloists often play in tender 4 against the basic 3, like new lovers learning the rhythms of each other's bodies. "Nonetheless," a gentle bossa nova, has an outspiraling melody, expansive modulations, and Wheeler's trademark intervallic leaps—always higher, wider, deeper than one foresees.

Who would write an elegy for a man whose every musical utterance was rich in harmonics of the elegiac? None more eloquently than Wheeler himself. —Richard Lehnert