

**Dave Allen**  
***The Sky Above Her***

In the interval since he released his extraordinary quartet album *Real and Imagined*, guitarist Dave Allen has seen and done a lot. He and his wife welcomed their daughter, Adrienne, to the world in 2010. Then the family embarked to Istanbul for three years, at a perilous time when Turkish democracy was steadily eroding (and still is). While there, Allen toured and collaborated extensively with musicians in Turkey and elsewhere in Europe. In 2016 he resettled in Philadelphia — which despite being his hometown was somewhat musically unfamiliar after 25 fruitful years in New York. But Allen has always found his footing, as is clear from his third statement as a leader, *The Sky Above Her*.

The stellar lineup on *Real and Imagined*, and its predecessor *Untold Stories* (2005), spoke not only to Allen's taste in bandmates, but also to his credibility as a composer and improviser. Not everyone can make a record with the likes of Seamus Blake, Drew Gress and Mark Ferber and be strong enough to assert their own individuality the way Allen did. (Carlo De Rosa played bass on the first one.) But that wasn't all: in 2012 Allen put his formidable straightahead chops on display, appearing on Philly tenorist Tom Tallitsch's *Heads or Tales*, featuring Ferber and organist Jared Gold. Allen's warm tone and effortlessly propulsive swing helped make it the hot, memorable session that it was.

*The Sky Above Her* reunites Allen with Gress and Ferber, but it also introduces piano for the first time on an Allen date — and not just any pianist but the seasoned and wildly imaginative Gary Versace, playing Rhodes as well on the fiendishly complex “Lacuna.” On tenor saxophone is the acclaimed, wonderfully unpredictable Jon Irabagon, whose creative free spirit as a soloist is balanced by his laser precision with Allen's often highly complex written parts.

The varied repertoire includes two companion pieces dedicated to young Adrienne; a lyrical bossa nova (“West Wind”) inspired by the poetry of Wallace Stevens; an ambitious workout (“Pulsion”) inspired by the writings of Roland Barthes; and an extended suite, “Thrown Voices,” originally conceived for jazz trio and string quartet, reconceived here for the band to dazzling effect. Allen's inventive way with rhythm and form, a focal point of his work, rewards close listening and attention.

“Playground (Pt 2),” a brief atmospheric sketch (shades of John Abercrombie's *Characters*, perhaps?), will send you back to *Real and Imagined* to hear “Playground (Part 1),” the origin of this intriguing little series. Part 2 is somewhat more ethereal, floating free of time, but consistent with Part 1 in its juxtaposition of airy guitar and beautiful, reflective pizzicato bass melody. The two parts convey a sense of development over time, as the abstract playground image comes into view. A fitting conclusion, it leaves us eager for the next weighty effort from Dave Allen, guitarist.

David R. Adler  
Athens, Georgia  
July 2018