

## David Kikoski, *Consequences*

When **David Kikoski** recorded **Consequences**, his ninth album as a leader for **Criss Cross**, he was in the midst of a full week at the Village Vanguard, playing in a quartet led by drummer **Jeff “Tain” Watts**. “It was a little crazy hectic,” says the pianist, recalling how he and Watts, after finishing the inspired document you hold in your hands, had to head right over to the famed Greenwich Village club in time for their 9pm set. But if anything, the deadline helped ignite a creative spark. And two live sets at the Vanguard the previous night ensured that “the vibe was totally hooked up,” as Kikoski puts it.

Not that a trio session with Kikoski, Watts and bassist **Christian McBride** is going to be anything less than tight and powerfully swinging. Kikoski has appeared on Watts’ albums *Detained at the Blue Note*, *Folk’s Songs* and *Family*, and he’s shared countless hours with the drummer on the road. Of McBride he says: “Christian and I had been talking about doing something together for a while. We’ve played in Tain’s band, in Roy Haynes’ Birds of a Feather project, a lot of gigs. But as far as one of my recordings, this is something new with the two of them [Watts and McBride] together.”

McBride, of course, is no stranger to **Criss Cross**: his 10 label appearances stretch back to 1991 and continue right up to Ulysses Owens’ 2012 debut **Unanimous** [Criss 1342]. Watts has 11 prior **Criss Cross** credits, five of them with Kikoski.

While Kikoski has led his share of non-trio sessions including **The Maze** [Criss 1168], **Combinations** [Criss 1226] and **Limits** [Criss 1284] — not to mention **Introducing Opus 5** [Criss 1339] with a new quintet supergroup — he always brings a special fire and focus to his trio outings, beginning with 1998’s **Inner Trust** [Criss 1148]. His trio catalog over the years has featured bassists Eddie Gomez, Essiet Essiet, James Genus, John Patitucci, Ed Howard, Eric Revis and Larry Grenadier, as well as drummers Watts, Al Foster, Leon Parker and Bill Stewart. But when Kikoski sat down to pen five new originals for **Consequences**, he had the sound of the McBride-Watts team very much in his ear.

Watts’ uptempo **Mr. JJ** first appeared on the drummer’s 2002 release *Bar Talk* as an epic tenor battle between Branford Marsalis and Michael Brecker. On *Detained* it was Kenny Garrett and Marcus Strickland who took up the same challenge. Here it is Kikoski in the spotlight, sailing confidently over the irregular second half of the form. There’s something of a Horace Silver-ish quality to Watts’ catchy theme, a kind of “bluesy chant” in Kikoski’s words. “When I’ve played it with Tain I’ve changed the chords a bit, so for this date I actually gave the reharmonization to Christian so he could play it with me. It has a bit of a different twist harmonically.”

**Russian Roulette** is a complex work that reveals Kikoski’s penchant for offbeat orchestration. “In most jazz songs you’ll have the bass note on the bottom, chords in the middle and melody on top. I’m trying to move that around, so here I have a piano ostinato in the middle register, the chords on top and the bass playing the melodic idea in the beginning. I was really thinking of Christian on this one. He’s got such a big sound and his intonation is so great — it’s a pleasure to write for him because I knew he could phrase it the way he wants, just the way a singer would.”

Regarding the busier second section, Kikoski offers: "It has a lot of fifths and fourths intervals, with static sus-type chords jumping around to fit the different melodic shapes. I wanted a heavier rock feel there from Tain, because that part is almost Zappa-esque. And from there it builds into an odd-meter ostinato, a return to the original ostinato in the right hand but with some angular bass notes that I double with Christian. It's perfect for Tain to build up there and embellish. Generally I would have brought in a simpler head chart, something easier to read, but with these guys I can get intricate and they'll nail it the first time."

**Drama** is a flowing piece in a 12/8 time feel. "I wrote it in four, but I like to play over 12/8 and 6/8, and I've been working on superimposing different rhythms on top of four. The bridge gets a little more misterioso, with some darker voicings, also some counterpoint, little inner melodies leading from one chord to another. Sometimes with dark chords it becomes so static and you can't really feel the relationships. So I use counterpoint in the voicings to create smooth movement." The bass-drums breakdown midway through wasn't planned, but it was perfectly placed. Kikoski recalls: "After my solo I wanted it to breathe a little bit. So I laid out and Jeff and Christian created a little duet."

**Placidity** is "almost like a soul ballad," says Kikoski, and McBride's articulation is close to what one might hear from an electric bass (an instrument he plays just as superbly). "As the title says, I wanted something relaxed, and I was thinking again of those guys. We all love Marvin Gaye and Stevie Wonder, Motown, stuff like that. It's still jazz but it has a little of that flavor."

**Blutain**, another Watts original, is "one that we play a lot live," Kikoski remarks. "We do it as a break tune, and sometimes we do it short. It's just so swinging – a basic blues form with a sort of simple but weird melody. It's fun because I can reharmonize it differently even if the bass is just playing blues. It's fun to stretch out on. I've played a lot of Tain's music and all his songs have something interesting. He's always able to incorporate his metric ideas into his compositions, and each one for me is a little lesson in rhythmic displacement and what not."

**(Still) A Glimmer of Hope**, according to Kikoski, refers to "romantic situations, when things seem to be falling apart, but somehow you know there's a way to fix it — that the relationship will somehow continue, and be even better than it was before. There are lots of metric twists in this one — I was almost thinking of some of Tain's tunes. I wrote the middle section first. I have little melodic cues that bring it into the fast tempo, which is actually where we start. So in other words, after I wrote the tune I turned it around upside down. At one point we put a new metric modulation that wasn't even part of the music — somehow we came up with a different 4/4 tempo at the end. When we listened back, we said, 'Wow, we weren't supposed to do that.' But we liked it, it was fresh, so we kept the first take as is."

**Consequences**, the title track, fell into two distinct parts, although the piece itself is almost entirely free. "This one was basically improvised in the studio," Kikoski reveals. "I had some sketches, some of the chordal ideas, and there's a little melody that comes in on the piano in part two. But the whole first section is me improvising." McBride eventually begins a steady-pulsing eighth-note pedal, an idea that came out of the blue. "I set up a mood and told the guys to just play whatever they hear. After Christian started that bass line, everything I did was just reacting to him. In the second section it's sort of C minor-ish, but not really — I didn't give them a particular key or any instructions. In

terms of the title, I was thinking of the consequences of our actions: career, romantic things, but also musical consequences, spontaneity. In this tune we're making a lot of decisions, the way you have to do in life. And what came out were the consequences of those actions."

***Never Let Me Go***, a Livingston/Evans standard from 1956, gives Kikoski an opportunity to shine in a poetic solo piano context. "I played this live with Roy Haynes, sometimes as a trio feature. Here I ended up changing the melody and going to different keys. Roy used to say that if you know the melody, you don't necessarily have to play it. But he could tell if you knew the melody, even if you didn't play the melody. It's like Coleman Hawkins' 'Body and Soul': he's blowing but you can hear that the melody is in there. There's a difference between embellishing the melody and just not knowing the melody, a big difference. That's the kind of stuff you learn from Roy. It's so nice to still be associated with him, working with him a couple times a year."

With that, **Consequences** was a wrap. But for Kikoski and Watts, the marathon of music was not over. Two sweaty, blues-drenched, rhythmically tumultuous sets at the Vanguard were still ahead. "We ended up having plenty of time," Kikoski says, recalling the brisk pace of the recording date and then the dash from Brooklyn to Manhattan. "I knew with guys this great, I didn't need to worry."

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