

Dick Oatts, *Lookin' Up*

Jazz is every bit about relationships, and saxophone master **Dick Oatts** has cultivated more than a few over the decades. His recordings are alive with the spark of longstanding musical affinity. His recent efforts featuring trumpeters Joe Magnarelli and Terell Stafford give ample proof that swinging, in-the-pocket, harmonically challenging jazz remains a living and growing art. With *Lookin' Up*, Oatts sticks with that fertile approach but changes the lineup by enlisting trombone veteran **John Mosca**. "John has been my colleague for the past 34 years in the Vanguard Jazz Orchestra, formerly the Thad Jones/Mel Lewis Jazz Orchestra," Oatts marvels. Quite a relationship indeed.

"I've always liked the way alto sax and trombone blend together," Oatts continues, "and I've always been meaning to do a CD with John but the music was never quite right for it. So I sat down over the holiday break and wrote the music around John, the alto and the trombone."

Mosca's talent speaks for itself on *Lookin' Up*, but Oatts illuminates it further: "He's an amazing improviser and I really like the chances he takes. He has more chops than I do on the alto. His harmonic sense is so rooted and everything just lines up so free and effortlessly. There's nothing in question and no wasted notes when John plays. It's all there, and it's all real. It was a challenging experience for me as well as educational."

Going in, Oatts had in mind a chord-less environment, with just the two horns up front. *Lookin' Up* does include a number of tunes in that format, but pianist **Ted Rosenthal** comes on board for several as well. Oatts has been a member of several projects of Ted's in the past 25 years, and was happy to finally include Ted on one of his own. "He's been a dear and longtime friend," Oatts says. "A couple of things had a lot of changes and I really needed his texture. He's so quick and knows exactly what I'm hearing from past experiences. Each take he played was amazing. He knew the music after one reading."

Faithful listeners will recall **David Wong** as an alternate bassist on Oatts's 2010 SteepleChase effort *Two Hearts*. Wong's performance so impressed Oatts that he helped recruit the New York native and Juilliard alum as the full-time bassist in the Vanguard band (filling the big shoes of the late Dennis Irwin). "What a great sound and time feel," Oatts remarks. "David is young and he's really into taking a path of total support. It doesn't matter how tired he is, or how many solos he's heard, this guy is into giving it up. The mantra in the Vanguard Jazz Orchestra is to put the music before anything else."

Wong's rapport with drummer **Rodney Green** proves crucial as well. A Philadelphia native, the accomplished Green has appeared with Oatts on *Two Hearts* as well as *Bridging the Gap*, a 2009 co-led effort with Terell Stafford. "Rodney is a fantastic musician and person," Oatts offers. "To me he locks everything together, all my crazy lines. He has a unique way of making it feel good and bringing rhythmic sense to it."

Oatts and Mosca weave through the intricate polyphonic theme of **One for Benny**, highlighting the beautiful alto/trombone blend that Oatts was after. "I wrote this as a tribute to Benny Golson but I had Mosca in mind." In contrast, one might pick up hints of Joe Henderson's harmonic world in the midtempo **Alaina's Song**, written for Oatts's

precocious nine-year-old daughter. Green's subtle hi-hat work, Wong's leadoff solo, the horns' compelling statements and a wrap-up from Rosenthal give the take a fine contour.

Looked at as a unit, **Just Us** and **Brook's Blues** bring Oatts's advanced linear logic and theoretical knowledge into relief, without ever sounding studied. The former, based on "Just Friends" chord changes, finds Oatts attempting to "use a more angular way of playing melodically," as he puts it. "It's a sound I wanted to get more flexibility on, and learn how many options I could have with it. I like that major 7th sound — I'm starting on the major 7th and Mosca is starting on the root, so he's going up but I'm going down. That gets the angry stuff in." The heavily disguised blues, titled for legendary composer and mentor Bob Brookmeyer, features Rosenthal playing what Oatts describes as "some real space-age hits," but no chords at all during the piano solo. "Bob really opened me up to improvising on a framework," Oatts says, naming Brookmeyer's "ABC Blues" as an inspiration.

The ballad **Goodbye Moody** is, of course, a nod to the irrepressible saxophonist, flutist, vocalist and jazz pioneer James Moody, who left us in December 2010. "We were good friends, like he was with a million other people," Oatts remembers. "When he passed, you just knew: there's something that won't be repeated again. I wanted to tell him thank you for the love he gave so many musicians, so many people. I hope wherever he is, he's in the same heaven he gave us."

Before settling into moderate swing, **Tap and Strut** begins unusually: with Green's martial snare pattern and a twisting melody line voiced in unison by both horns and bass. Even with just four instruments (and no piano), Oatts is able to craft remarkably subtle orchestrations. "I thought I'd write a head based on common etudes from various method books," he comments. "It's in three different keys, and I added a medium walking groove." Oatts and Mosca both exploit the open harmonic space during their solos. Wong, after taking his own solo turn, plays time rather than unison through the final head — another deliberate choice on Oatts's part: "I wanted people to hear the harmony as it related to the melody. I wanted both ideas to be heard."

The Auctioneer, a calypso-inflected finale, employs the chord changes to "The Groove Merchant," a timeless Jerome Richardson vehicle for the Thad Jones/Mel Lewis Jazz Orchestra. "I wanted to put a little tempo on it, because I knew it was right up Mosca's alley," Oatts explains. "Also, the offbeat head is sort of like an auctioneer on steroids."

Lookin' Up, the title track, reveals some gospel traces and features some of Rosenthal's most forceful playing of the date. The sunny mood evokes Oatts's intended message of "embracing the unknown without fear" and bringing "a new tradition of democracy and creativity to the world we share" — a statement he puts forward to the human community at large. "There are too many camps for people to really understand and appreciate the fact that we're all in this together. Despite the in-house arguments, we all have to come together and support a multitude of visions in this life. We have to enjoy the creative moments that we have, instead of living in regret. Life is hard enough without beating up on others and especially ourselves. When you tap the creative spirit — that joy of letting go and opening up — that is when you're looking up in the right direction."

— David R. Adler
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