

## **Franco Ambrosetti**

### ***Cheers!***

“Cheers” indeed! Franco Ambrosetti celebrated his 75<sup>th</sup> birthday on December 10, 2016, and what better way to mark the occasion than a recording session? The result is Ambrosetti’s 15<sup>th</sup> album for the Enja label since 1979, an auspicious event in itself. “All the musicians on this album had played on previous projects I’ve realized with Enja,” says the Switzerland-born trumpeter. “We thought of the session as a private party with great musicians having the additional fun of playing some songs together. No hassle, no difficult stuff to read, just music like in a jam, with a little bit of organization.”

This birthday album prompts us to reflect on the scope of Ambrosetti’s career: son of bebop altoist Flavio Ambrosetti (a major player in European jazz going back to the ’40s), the young Franco joined his father’s quintet in 1962 and would come to share the stage with the likes of Kenny Clarke, Dexter Gordon, Donald Byrd, Johnny Griffin, Benny Golson, Woody Shaw and many more. George Gruntz, the pianist in his father’s quintet, would soon be a celebrated bandleader and composer, and Franco was intimately involved: in the ’70s he became a founding member and associate musical director of the celebrated George Gruntz Concert Jazz Band, serving in that capacity until 1985. It’s fitting that Ambrosetti has interpreted many Gruntz compositions on his own records over the years. In fact you’ll hear one on *Cheers!*

Music isn’t the whole story, however: from 1973 to 2000, Ambrosetti was an executive in the Ambrosetti Industrial Group (first Vice President, then CEO and finally Chairman). In this “day job” he oversaw the manufacture of steel wheels and aircraft landing gear. All the while, through the ’80s and ’90s and up to today, he has forged relationships with a new cast of stellar musicians, including the ones on this recording. He’s also passed the torch, just as his father once did, to his own son Gianluca, a fine soprano saxophonist who appears on a number of previous Enja dates and plays on two tracks here.

For a laid-back and carefree session, it’s hard to think of more ideal common ground than “Autumn Leaves,” the leadoff track and the one tune on *Cheers!* that Ambrosetti has previously recorded. On his superbly named 1984 date *Gin and Pentatonic*, he introduced the Prévert/Kosma classic with a rubato trumpet cadenza and then cued the band — Tommy Flanagan with Dave Holland and Daniel Humair — for some searing uptempo swing. Here the song is slower, moodier, more grooving, with Buster Williams setting up the feel (Williams played on *Gin and Pentatonic* as well). Soon he’s joined by Uri Caine on piano and Jack DeJohnette on drums in a powerful modal jazz vein.

“I played with Uri for a week at Sweet Basil in ’94,” Ambrosetti recalls. “He’s often in Europe where we play music from Bach to Coltrane and explore how close Baroque music is to jazz.” With Caine’s trio, Ambrosetti also recorded a CD for Enja in 2007 called *The Wind*. But *Cheers!* marks the trumpeter’s first-ever playing encounter with DeJohnette: “I always wanted to work with him, and I thought it was a good time to remedy this shortcoming.”

Aside from “Autumn Leaves,” the remaining songs are all new to Ambrosetti’s Enja discography. The idea was not simply to look back but to explore new territory. The standards include “I’m Glad There Is You” and “Bye Bye Blackbird” with Kenny Barron, Buster and DeJohnette; “Someday My Prince Will Come” with Barron, Buster and the formidable Terri Lyne Carrington; and finally “Body and Soul,” closing out the set in a beautiful drumless trio with Buster and pianist Dado Moroni, who has worked with Ambrosetti since the early ’80s. In another first, Carrington and DeJohnette, mentee and mentor, pair up on an Ambrosetti original called “Drums Corrida,” written specially for this occasion and this drum pairing in particular.

“No Silia, No Party,” another Ambrosetti piece, features altoist Greg Osby, a longtime presence on Ambrosetti’s Enja projects, from *Movies Too* (1988) all the way to his recent Coltrane homage *After the Rain* (2015). Osby and guitarist John Scofield, another Ambrosetti colleague from way back, join Ambrosetti and Moroni for the upbeat George Gruntz vehicle “The Smart Went Crazy.” And Scofield remains on board, with Franco’s fellow trumpeter Randy Brecker, for the slow-boiling, minor-key swing of the Joey Calderazzo number “Midnight Voyage.” This tune was in the repertoire of the late tenor master Michael Brecker, an important figure in Ambrosetti’s earlier Enja days. “Michael was one very special friend I missed dearly at the session,” the leader says. “But Randy, my friend since 1966, could come!” On piano is the marvelous Antonio Faraò, who has worked with Franco in many settings including his 1998 Enja session *Light Breeze*.

“I plan to continue featuring all these great players in the future, as long as they are free,” Ambrosetti says. There will certainly be more to hear from this vital trumpet voice, rich with decades of immersion in bebop and all that has come in its wake. One can rightfully take pride in reaching 75 while also acknowledging, as the saying goes, that age is nothing but a number. So raise a glass, have a listen, and be reminded of music’s power to confer eternal youth.

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