

Criss 1301 CD

Eric Alexander
Grant Stewart
David Hazeltine
Peter Washington
Kenny Washington

John Swana

Bright Moments

Criss Cross Jazz 1301

BRIGHT MOMENTS JOHN SWANA

1. **WILBERT**
(J. Swana) 4.45
2. **CHILLIN' OUT**
(J. Swana) 6.21
3. **ROAD TRIPPIN'**
(J. Swana) 6.45
4. **FERRIS WHEEL**
(J. Swana) 7.45
5. **SHRACK'S CORNER II**
(J. Swana) 5.25
6. **BRIGHT MOMENTS**
(J. Swana) 8.11
7. **INEVITABLE ENCOUNTER**
(J. Swana) 8.07
8. **EVERYTHING I HAVE IS YOURS**
(B. Lane) 6.49
9. **KD**
(J. Swana) 7.04
10. **OPEN HIGHWAY**
(J. Swana) 6.27
11. **SHRACK'S CORNER I**
(J. Swana) 4.34

TOTAL TIME: 73.00

JOHN SWANA trumpet, flugelhorn
ERIC ALEXANDER tenor sax
GRANT STEWART tenor sax
DAVID HAZELTINE piano
PETER WASHINGTON bass
KENNY WASHINGTON drums

Produced by Gerry Teekens
Recording Engineer: Max Bolleman
Mastering: The Masters
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Bright Moments

John Swana picked up the expression “bright moments” from organist Trudy Pitts, one of the grand matrons of the Philadelphia jazz scene. Those two little words convey a lot about the life-affirming essence of jazz.

For Swana, the Philly native and master trumpeter, “bright moments” has come to signify a specific aspect of the jazz life: making records. He recently brought fire and imagination to Donny McCaslin’s ***Give and Go*** (Criss 1277). His 11th outing as a leader bears Pitts’s phrase as its title and finds him in the company of friends and fellow virtuosos — two of whom (**Peter and Kenny Washington**) played on his very first album, ***Introducing John Swana*** (Criss 1045), in late 1990. As a team, the unrelated Washingtons have plenty of other **Criss Cross** dates under their belt as well. Recording high-level music with top-tier players like these isn’t all hard work. Get the right human beings together and “you know you’re going to have a bunch of laughs,” Swana confides.

One of Swana’s recent titles, ***On Target*** (Criss 1241), featured him in a pared-down quartet with underrated guitarist Jesse van Ruller. ***Bright Moments***, in contrast, is pared up — a three-horn sextet in the mold of ***Philly Gumbo Vol. 2*** (Criss 1260) or the co-led ***Philly-New York Junction*** dates with Joe Magnarelli. In addition to Swana’s longtime compatriot **Eric Alexander**, the present

album includes the darker-toned tenor man **Grant Stewart**, heard on the right channel. Together, Eric and Grant lead a quintet called **Reeds and Deeds**, which has released two worthy **Criss Cross** discs, ***Wailin’*** (Criss 1258) and ***Cookin’*** (Criss 1283). “I love their playing of course, but also their personalities,” says Swana. “They’re both witty but really different, and I was literally right in between them at the session while they made comments back and forth.” On piano we have **David Hazeltine**, a gifted composer and arranger in his own right and an important member of the **Criss Cross** family — a *Reeds and Deeds* member, he last appeared with Swana on 1999’s ***Tug of War*** (Criss 1163).

Swana brought in a brand new crop of originals for the date. But in various ways, these performances bear the creative imprint of everyone involved. “All the guys are helpful and it’s always about the music,” Swana notes. “If anybody hears something, they suggest it.” Time-feel shifts, modifications in form, apportioning melodies among the horns: some of these details were sorted out collaboratively, and quickly. The band nailed every intricacy while preserving a loose and spontaneous vibe.

Wilbert is a fast-paced line over a tricky series of dominant and minor chords. It’s named for Wilbert Montgomery, the record-setting former running back for the Philadelphia Eagles. Each soloist has to contend with a series of syncopated rhythmic

obstacles before breaking free over the changes — it's vaguely reminiscent of tunes like Joe Henderson's "*The Kicker*." Note also the added ninth bar in the final A section. Peter Washington follows the three horns with a bass solo, one of only two in the set. "Peter usually says no," Swana laughs. "But on this one he said ok."

Chillin' Out does just that, over a slow, syncopated swing groove with a singable tenor sax melody. "The vibe I was thinking of here was '*Lil' Darlin'*,' that laid-back feel," Swana says. "I wrote the melody for myself but then I realized it was Eric's. It's totally his sound. He has a resonance and bravado that made it perfect." Hazeltine solos first, keeping the mood mellow. Stewart and Alexander split a chorus between them before Swana brings it home. Note how they each exploit the harmonic twists in the seventh and eighth bars.

Road Trippin' is a bright, open swing tune that evokes the Swana family's cross-country drive to the Grand Canyon some years ago. The form is unusual: two 16-bar A sections and an eight-bar modal B section. "I wrote the B section as 16 bars," Swana explains, "but Hazeltine suggested we cut it in half. I really like the contrast." The pianist begins to stir with single notes under the legato horn theme, but it is Alexander who gets the first solo, followed by Swana, Stewart and then the insightful Hazeltine.

Ferris Wheel is a spacious, evocative waltz, captured on the first take. "When I write tunes in 3/4," Swana observes, "there's a thread that seems to run through them, with a certain kind of harmonic motion." (The melancholy, impressionistic "*Sweet Sadness*," from ***On Target***, is a case in point.) Swana conceived this winding arpeggiated melody on trumpet; the tenors play off of it with background lines in the second half of the form. After the horn solos, Hazeltine steps forward, and much like on the ballad, the rhythm section interplay takes on heightened clarity. Kenny Washington begins to color around the drum kit and suggest an Elvin Jones feel, perhaps in response to Hazeltine's largely chordless musings.

Shrack's Corner II started as just a gleam in Swana's eye: "I had this melody in my head for years, but I never thought it could be a tune. Then I realized it could be a blues." And that indeed it is: a hard-nosed straightahead line, voiced for trumpet and tenor (Stewart). This lively take features just a quartet with no piano (Alexander and Hazeltine were called away on other business), so it inspires the players to interact from another angle. The plan is simple: trumpet, tenor and bass solos, a decisive round of traded fours and out. As a closer of the CD the first take is added with Eric Alexander and Grant Stewart still present.

The title track, ***Bright Moments***, is a brisk, modern variant of

the Arlen/Mercer standard "*My Shining Hour*." Swana voices the horns in fourths and has the bass and piano lay out on the A sections of the head. "I wrote the trumpet line first," he reveals. "Sometimes the tenors are with me and sometimes they split apart and answer." Alexander follows Swana in the solos and briefly quotes the "*Shining Hour*" melody before handing off to Stewart. Hazeltine's turn introduces pointed rhythmic tension in the last chorus, before the horns reenter to trade eights with the drums.

Inevitable Encounter, a dark theme with a funky straight-eighth feel, posits some intriguing sectional interplay: piano doubles the low-register bass line while the horns answer to flesh out the harmonic content of the tune. "The voicing in the horns is a fourth and a tritone, so there's some tension to it," says Swana. "It's basically a pedal blues." Hazeltine resumes the chordal role as Swana leads off the solos, snaking through the odd turnaround. Stewart, Hazeltine and Alexander follow. Note how Washington restates the written bass line at the top of each solo.

Swana sticks to open, un-muted trumpet for his quartet ballad feature, ***Everything I Have Is Yours***, a Burton Lane show tune associated with Billie Holiday and Billy Eckstine. In addition to Swana's glowing performance, this track affords the chance to hear the rhythm section more intimately. Peter and Kenny Washington, the backbone of Bill Charlap's trio for several

years, have a way of lighting a ballad from within. Hazeltine's accompaniment, too, is beautifully realized.

KD stands for Kenny Dorham and bears some of the late master's melodic imprint. Dorham was "a later big influence" for Swana: "My early influences were Miles, Freddie Hubbard, Tom Harrell. Eric turned me on to the *Quiet Kenny* album and I just loved it. He's real honest when he plays." Swana solos at a cool, confident pace before yielding to the gruff-toned Stewart and the fleet-fingered Alexander. The group's sense of swing is broad and deep, thanks in no small part to Washington's bass, which carries particular force under the piano solo.

Open Highway begins with a tight introduction and moves into gliding uptempo swing. Swana states the melody alone before the tenors join in. Alexander and Stewart split the bridge of the AABA form, then play elaborated polyphony behind Swana on the last A. "I was really trying to think melodically on this record," Swana explains, "trying to write something that could be a standard." Stewart leads off, followed by the leader, Alexander and Hazeltine.

You might not expect it from someone who can ace an in-the-pocket date like this, but Swana does a good deal of work with the EVI (electronic valve instrument) and performs around Philly

with an “electric Miles” project, manipulating a full complement of effects pedals. **Bright Moments** isn’t the last word from this versatile Philadelphian, but it documents a formidable jazz trumpeter on his home turf, in top form, having a great time. What could be brighter?

David R. Adler

The Philadelphia Inquirer, Jazz Times