

Johnathan Blake **Gone, But Not Forgotten**

One of the most in-demand drummers of his generation, Philadelphia-born **Johnathan Blake** has done stellar work as a member of the Tom Harrell Quintet, the Mingus Big Band, the Ravi Coltrane Quartet, the Kenny Barron Trio and Quintet and many others. He was the model of precision and creativity on trumpeter Alex Sipiagin's **Mirrors** (Criss 1236) and **Mirages** (Criss 1311), and now he's back with his first **Criss Cross** album as a leader, **Gone, But Not Forgotten**.

All the tunes here are chosen in honor of recently departed jazz greats, and yet the spirit is celebratory and affirming, not funereal. "The main thing for me," Blake says, "is that a lot of these people, sometimes we talk about them for a minute and then we forget about them. I wanted to make a point of stating, 'We're not forgetting about you. Your music will still live if I have something to say about it.'" Enfolded within this tribute is another tribute, Blake says, "to some of the musicians in Philadelphia that I grew up listening to and playing with," including Trudy Pitts, Sid Simmons and Charles Fambrough.

And the band Blake assembled to take on this material? Only some of the most renowned and experienced players in the world: tenor saxophonists **Chris Potter** and **Mark Turner**, bassist **Ben Street**. No chordal instrument. The broad, open-ended sound perfectly suits these personalities and the talents they bring to the table. "I wanted to make this record with people I've known for a while, people who've helped me grow as a musician," says Blake. "And also guys that have worked with some of the very artists whose songs I was recording." True enough: Street, Potter and Turner all share overlapping associations with the late Paul Motian, to name just one. Street and Turner also worked together in Kurt Rosenwinkel's influential quartet of the late '90s and early '00s.

This particular band was born thanks to a last-minute cancelation at The Jazz Gallery in New York. Blake was asked to sub on short notice, and within an hour he booked the lineup on this CD. "It seemed like it was meant to be," Blake recalls. "It was such a beautiful experience. We didn't rehearse at all. It just felt so good." That live and spontaneous feeling prevails on **Gone, But Not Forgotten**.

"Mark and Chris have such a mutual respect but they're not going to cater to one another," Blake adds. "Chris is not going to try to sound like Mark and vice versa. They focus on how they play, but also listen really well. Mark has such a wide harmonic sensibility, and without the chords it really frees him up. I really enjoy that freedom in his playing. It was also interesting to hear Chris in that setting — he typically uses a chordal instrument although he's played trio on recordings by Scott Colley and Steve Swallow. Mark, Ben and I have played trio in the past, and the two of them appeared on my 2012 debut album *The Eleventh Hour*."

Potter and Turner begin just as a duo on Eddie Harris's ***Cryin' Blues***, foregrounding the two-tenor sound off the bat. Potter starts the solos in muscular fashion, followed in the right channel by Turner, who mines the horn's every register and swings hard. "I've always been a big fan of Eddie Harris, the way he infused the funk element," Blake says. "I grew up playing a lot of R&B and hip-hop, so when I first heard him it grabbed me. He never got his just due. I started playing this tune a lot with Steve Wilson, and I knew I

wanted to continue to play it.”

Cedar Walton’s ***Firm Roots*** is upbeat and colorful, almost like a fanfare. Turner leads off and cooks relentlessly. Potter ups the intensity still before Blake has his solo and the two tenors duel on the rideout. “There are many different versions of this, but we did it the way it was first played,” says Blake. “I wanted to go back to the roots and find the original arrangement. I transcribed it and thought it would work perfectly. It’s challenging to bring in music with a strong harmonic structure and not have a chordal instrument, but the way these guys play, it’s not a problem.”

Maracas Beach is by pianist and Philadelphia hero Sid Simmons, lost to illness in 2010. The tune appears on Grover Washington, Jr.’s 1978 album *Reed Seed*, and here it features Potter on an instrument he’s been using more and more with Pat Metheny: the alto flute. “I love the sound of the flute and tenor together,” Blake explains. The emotional connection runs deep with this song: “I considered Sid Simmons an uncle. My father [violinist John Blake, Jr.] began working with Grover in 1976 and that was the year I was born. So I knew Sid since I was a baby, and I got the opportunity to play in his band a few times coming up in Philly. I heard this tune at a very young age. I love tunes you’re able to walk away singing, and this is one. I still have it on vinyl so I put it on and transcribed it. I remember going home recently and playing the rough mix for my dad, and he told me it brought back so many memories.”

All Across the City, Jim Hall’s classic ballad, is one that Blake got to perform with the composer himself. “Last year I played with Jim at Scullers in Boston — a beautiful experience, so brief but so amazing to be onstage with him. We were just starting to become friends. I called him on his birthday and we talked for a while, and a few days later he was gone. I wanted to send my love out to him. He gave me a handwritten chart of this tune, so it was interesting to go through it. What he gave me had everything on it: all the harmonic motion, the bass notes, everything. I thought it would work perfectly, because the way the piece moves is right there on the chart. So we paid tribute to Jim that way.”

Broski is the nickname Art Blakey gave to bassist Charles Fambrough, a veteran of the Jazz Messengers as well as McCoy Tyner’s group with Al Foster, George Adams, Joe Ford and others. “Charles gave me my first professional gig,” Blake remembers. “He and my father were like brothers. He hooked my dad up with McCoy’s band. McCoy allowed all the band members to submit tunes, so I knew Charles’ writing, and then he put out his own record *The Proper Angle* in 1992, and let me tell you I wore that CD out. It literally broke and I had to get another one. This was one of the songs that really blew me away, with Jeff ‘Tain’ Watts, Kenny Kirkland, Wynton and Branford Marsalis and Joe Ford. It brought me back to the sound of McCoy when I first heard *Horizon*. I played the tune with Charles once and he gave me the lead sheet, so I brought it to the session.”

Born Yesterday, the first of two Blake originals, has Turner switching to soprano, interlacing with Potter’s tenor in a relaxed contrapuntal theme. “I like that Ben solos first, really giving us the jumping point to go somewhere else,” Blake says. Though the tune has an earlier provenance, Blake has rededicated it to Ana Grace Márquez-Greene, daughter of saxophonist and Criss Cross bandleader Jimmy Greene, a dear friend to so many in the jazz world. The death of six-year-old Ana in the Newtown massacre of December 2012 is unbearable to contemplate.

“You know, as parents you watch your kids change, it seems like they were born yesterday and the next thing you know they’re going off to school,” Blake muses. “My kids are already eight and six. Time with them is so precious because it goes by so fast. This thought came over me, overwhelming in a way, because I remember when Ana was born. This is a tribute to her and to Jimmy and Nelba, because they are so strong as a couple and as parents. It has a playful melody, and I wanted a higher-pitched instrument to signify a voice, a child’s voice. I wanted that sound of children playing.”

Circle Dance brings home the staggering influence of drummer and composer Paul Motian on successive generations of players, including all the sidemen on this recording. “I got to see Paul at the Vanguard with a lot of different groups,” Blake says. “I’ve always loved Paul’s ideas with time, the way he extended time around the drum kit, like a rubber band. He knew how to color and shape the time, starting almost from nothing and building to something. And he did it without overpowering the band, which to me is an amazing achievement. Miguel Zenón brought this piece in for a gig I had at Smalls with him and Seamus Blake, and I think Matt Penman on bass. I did some research and when I heard the version by Paul’s trio with Joe Lovano and Bill Frisell, I fell in love with it. In our version we never play the head again, we just play it once. Then there’s this shout chorus [underscoring the drum feature], which I think Miguel wrote, so we used that to take it out.”

With **New Wheels** by the great Mulgrew Miller, it becomes clear what kind of heat this quartet can generate on B-flat midtempo rhythm changes. The tune first appeared on Miller’s *With Our Own Eyes* (1994). Let’s also note that Miller’s sideman discography on Criss Cross reaches back to the LP era with **Introducing Kenny Garrett** (Criss 1014) in 1985. He also made sterling contributions to the Criss Cross recordings of Steve Nelson, Ralph Moore, Sam Newsome and several others. His most recent Criss Cross date was Alex Sipiagin’s **Mirages**, in a lineup that included Johnathan Blake.

“I played with Mulgrew on a few occasions,” Blake says, “and he recorded on my father’s album *Motherless Child*. I grew up listening to him with Freddie Hubbard, Woody Shaw and Art Blakey. When I heard his album *Hand In Hand* [1993] on the radio I flipped out. I went right to the store and picked it up. It was mainly all his compositions and the writing was just unbelievable. I always felt people didn’t get to hear his compositions often enough. On this record I wanted to play tunes that need to be heard by the public. Some of these iconic figures passed away so early — Mulgrew was only 57 when he passed.”

The haunting **Anysha** was composed by another Philadelphia legend, organist/pianist Trudy Pitts, who originally recorded it with Rahsaan Roland Kirk on *Other Folk’s Music* in 1976. Pianist and fellow Philadelphian Orrin Evans played it as well on his 2001 release **Blessed Ones** (Criss 1213). Here it shines as a trio feature for Mark Turner — no stranger to the chordless trio format as a member of Fly with Larry Grenadier and Jeff Ballard. “The song is for Trudy’s daughter,” Blake reveals. “My history with Trudy goes way back. She played at my grandmother’s funeral. She’s been one of these guiding lights for me. She would let me sit in with her trio, with Arthur Harper and Mickey Roker, at a very young age. She had a way of putting you on the right path. I’m indebted to her and also Sid, Charles Fambrough, my father — they all gave me a chance when I probably wasn’t ready. These people were willing to take time from what they were doing

to help guide me.”

Blake’s ***The Shadower***, essentially a drum feature, is dedicated to Dwayne Burno, one of the most authoritative and accomplished bassists of his generation, lost to complications from kidney disease at age 43 on December 28, 2013. Burno’s vital sideman appearances on *Criss Cross* — with Scott Wendholt, Greg Gisbert, John Swana, Luis Perdomo and others — date back to 1993. “I knew Dwayne at a very young age but didn’t work with him until I moved to New York,” says Blake. “He was like a brother. He was a complete musician and totally engrossed in music. That hit close to home when he passed. Our families would get together sometimes. We played together with Tom Harrell, Orrin Evans, Roy Hargrove and more. I had such a high respect for him as a musician and a father. I watched him especially later on and he was doing all the gigs he could because he was trying to provide for his family.”

Blake had previously worked up ***The Shadower*** with the Black Arts Jazz Collective, a collaborative group in which Burno also played. “In Black Arts it’s required to bring in music, and this was one of the tunes I brought,” Blake recalls. “I said I want it to be free, see where it goes. The vibe that Burno put on it was unreal. I would stare in amazement. He was one of these cats who could look at a tune once and internalize it right there.”

Signing off, Blake and the band pay tribute to Frank Foster and Frank Wess with Neal Hefti’s ***Two for the Blues***, from the 1954 book of the Count Basie New Testament band, as well as a vehicle for Lambert, Hendricks & Ross on *Sing a Song of Basie*. Foster and Wess also recorded an album called *Two for the Blues* for Pablo in 1984. “I got to sit down and talk with Frank Wess at Birdland when I was playing with Kenny Barron,” Blake says. “He was very complimentary toward me, just a gentleman. A couple years before that I was on tour in Virginia and Frank Foster came out the gig. I’ve always been a fan of his writing and arranging. He was confined to a wheelchair but it didn’t stop him. He told me. ‘I still get up every day and write.’ It just showed me that music is what saves a lot of us. It was inspiring to see somebody who was not going to be held back. I respect that so much. I can’t make any excuses for anything. I need to better myself as a musician.”

David R. Adler
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