



For George, Cole and Duke
Harry Allen (Blue Heron)
by Marcia Hillman

Tenor saxophonist Harry Allen is in the spotlight for the inaugural release of Blue Heron Records, joined by the talented group of pianist Ehud Asherie, bassist Nicki Parrott, drummer/vibraphonist Chuck Redd and guest percussionist Little Johnny Rivero. The mother lode of the Great American Songbook is Allen's field of exploration, specifically three of the all-time greats: George Gershwin, Cole Porter and Duke Ellington.

The album sounds like a group of friends getting together to make some good music, exchange creative ideas and simply have fun. Allen is in peak form, with his silky, smooth tone, wealth of improvisational musical ideas and knack for spontaneous arrangements especially suited to the sophisticated Ellington compositions, notably little-done "Purple Gazelle" and well-known "In a Mellow Tone". Asherie, master of many styles and able accompanist, is the perfect choice for the piano bench; listen for his solo-building master class on Porter's underdone "I Love You Samantha". Parrott, a solid presence throughout, shows off her soft and sweet vocal skills on Gershwin's "How Long Has This Been Going On?" and Ellington's "In a Mellow Tone" and "Mood Indigo". Redd delivers steady

drumming and inventive vibraphone contributions with tasteful fills behind Parrott's vocals and inspired solo work on Gershwin's "Who Cares?". Riveros' gifted hands add excitement on three tracks, particularly on Porter's "Love For Sale" in an arrangement by Redd.

Giants of American songwriters and a group of fabulous mainstream musicians results in an enjoyable and auspicious launch for a new label.

For more information, visit blueheronrecords.com. Allen is at Dizzy's Club Aug. 18th-23rd and 25th-30th. See Calendar.



The Epic
Kamasi Washington (Brainfeeder)
by David R. Adler

What a way to set apart one's debut: use a 10-piece band with two drummers, choir, string orchestra and enough music to fill not one but three CDs. Such is the bold vision of L.A.-based tenor saxophonist Kamasi Washington. Having worked with electronic music pioneer Flying Lotus (Steven Ellison), rapper Kendrick Lamar and others, Washington steps forward as a leader to reveal a raw, experimental but highly melodic sense of groove and swing. The sound is predominantly acoustic and consistent across the three discs: it's a unified statement, even if each CD has its own title.

As the opening "Change of the Guard" plays and the big, unfamiliar sound of the choir and strings wells up, it's a bit taxing at first. The elements don't immediately feel well integrated; it takes a few tracks for the ear to accept this teeming environment as a thing to savor. By the time one gets to "Re-Run" on Disc Two, the choir sounds amazingly subtle, like an intergalactic mellotron. (8 of the 17 tracks feature a smaller band lineup with no choir or strings.) Washington's heavy use of organ, played at different times by Cameron Graves and Brandon Coleman, adds a kind of psychedelic church element. Electric bassist Stephen "Thundercat" Bruner brings his unique sensibility to nine tracks and is simply astonishing on the very last of them, "The Message".

Despite the profuse instrumentation, it's the intimate frontline blend of Washington and trombonist Ryan Porter that defines much of the music. The unison or harmonized horn melodies are memorable, some slow and legato ("Isabelle", "The Next Step"), others rapid-fire and full of urgency ("Miss Understanding"). Some tunes follow a similar pattern, with a foreboding groove-based theme giving way to a brighter, airier B section. But Washington departs from this formula with almost poppy inventions that stand apart, such as "The Rhythm Changes" and "Leroy and Lenisha".

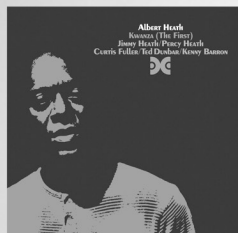
Interestingly, Washington reserves the non-originals—bebop staple "Cherokee", Debussy's "Claire de Lune", Terence Blanchard's "Malcolm's Theme"—for Disc Three, reformulating each of them in ways that enhance the band's language. One needs the preparation of Discs One and Two, perhaps, to appreciate why these cover arrangements work so well.

For more information, visit brainfeedersite.com. Washington is at Blue Note Aug. 24th-25th. See Calendar.

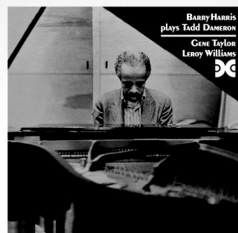
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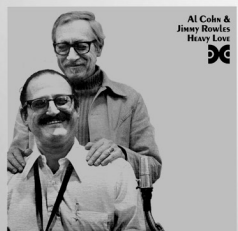
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