

BORIS KOZLOV
JEFF 'TAIN' WATTS
SEAMUS BLAKE

Combinations David Kikoski



Criss Cross Jazz 1226

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CRISS 1226 CD

Made in Holland **D D D**

COMBINATIONS DAVID KIKOSKI

1. **IMPROVISATIONS** 5.46

Part I: Intro

Part II: Trio

2. **CECILIA** 6.39

3. **DUO, Part I** 5.46

4. **BASS INTERLUDE** 1.29

5. **TAMAMI** 7.48

6. **HARMONIZING INSTINCTS** 6.38

7. **BLUES FOR US** 7.58

8. **DUO, Part II** 5.09

9. **TRIO IMPROVISATION, Part II** 4.47

All compositions by David Kikoski.

Jeff 'Tain' Watts appears courtesy of Columbia records.

TOTAL TIME: 52.37

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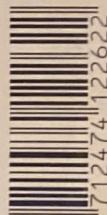
DAVID KIKOSKI piano
BORIS KOZLOV bass
JEFF 'TAIN' WATTS drums
SEAMUS BLAKE tenor sax (2,6)

Produced by Gerry Teekens
Executive Producer: K. Hasselpflug
Recording Engineer: Max Bolleman
Recorded: December 16, 2001
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Brooklyn, N.Y.
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Combinations

I'll never forget the first time I heard **David Kikoski**. It was at the Berklee Performance Center in early 1987, when the young pianist was earning his wings as a member of the Roy Haynes Group. Together with tenor saxophonist Ralph Moore and bassist Ed Howard, Kikoski took the stage at his alma mater and waited for Haynes to emerge. After a delay long enough to provoke nervous laughter from the audience, Haynes appeared and promptly counted off "*My Shining Hour*" at a blistering tempo. Kikoski, with his wild eyes and mop of curly hair, drew one's attention right away. He comped for Moore closely and forcefully, then launched into a solo that was so uncommonly audacious, so blindingly fast, so densely packed with clever and well-formed ideas, that one could practically hear the sound of jaws dropping throughout the hall. His convulsive upper-body gyrations seemed involuntary and oddly appropriate, lending his performance an aura of possession. These physical displays, which would mellow as Kikoski matured, were indicative of a singular fire in his playing, an enthusiasm that would gain in depth and refinement as the years progressed.

Kikoski, now 40, went on to log over 15 years in Roy Haynes's working bands. Along the way he picked up gigs with the likes of Bob Berg and Randy Brecker. But as far back as 1989, he began to establish himself as an able bandleader and

composer in his own right. After putting out strong albums on the Freelance, Triloka, and Sony Epicure labels, he debuted on **Criss Cross** in 1998 with the remarkable **Inner Trust** (Criss Cross 1148). Three more titles - **The Maze** (Criss Cross 1168), **Almost Twilight** (Criss Cross 1190), and **Surf's Up** (Criss Cross 1208) - followed in quick succession.

Combinations, the present collection, finds Kikoski in the company of bassist **Boris Kozlov** and drummer **Jeff "Tain" Watts**, with tenor saxophonist **Seamus Blake** joining on two cuts. Watts, an emerging leader himself (see his Columbia discs *Citizen Tain* and *Bar Talk*), has been known for years as one of the finest musicians of his generation. He also happens to be one of Kikoski's firmest allies, appearing on all but the first of the pianist's Criss Cross outings. Kozlov, a deep, virtuosic player, met Kikoski through the Mingus Big Band and has become a regular presence on the pianist's gigs and tours. His other recording credits include **Hindsight** (Criss Cross 1220), the second Criss Cross disc from trumpeter and fellow Mingus Big Band regular Alex Sipiagin. (Kikoski and Watts played on **Steppin' Zone** [Criss Cross 1202], Sipiagin's first.)

Seamus Blake, winner of the 2002 Thelonious Monk International Jazz Saxophone Competition, is another of Kikoski's Mingus Big Band connections. The celebrated

tenorman played on Kikoski's 1999 offering, **The Maze**. Kikoski returned the favor two years later by lending his voice to Blake's **Echonomics** (Criss Cross 1197). Together with Kozlov, Watts, and Sipiagin, Blake also appears on a Kikoski-led quintet session called *The 5*, recorded on the fly for DIW-Disk Union during a tour of Japan in the summer of 2001. *Comfortable Strange*, a companion trio disc recorded during the same 48-hour period, also features Kozlov and Watts. Listen to **Combinations**, recorded shortly thereafter, and you'll hear a rapport that reflects a glut of shared experience, on the road and in the studio.

This is Kikoski's third all-original recording to date, and as the title suggests, it features a number of different ensemble settings and creative approaches. It also presents two of the leader's older compositions in a new context. "I try to do something different with each record," Kikoski says. "This time I wanted to vary the instrumentation but still make a unified statement on one CD. I also wanted to find a balance between free improvisation and structured tunes."

The program begins on the free side, with a brisk trio improvisation prefaced by nearly three minutes of meditative solo piano. "I wrote a very short, simple motif," Kikoski explains. "The solo piece is loosely based on that, and you

hear it also in the first trio piece." Kozlov uses the same motif as a springboard for his **Bass Interlude**; it returns again on the final track, **Trio Improvisation, Part II**, a summation in burning swing time. "I wanted to let the trio play open, with no chords, hardly a melody at all."

Two untitled duos for piano and bass also appear, but unlike the trio selections, these are meticulously composed. The romantic **Duo, Part I** lilts in a deceptively accented 4/4, with an intricate unison passage erupting just before the bass solo. **Duo, Part II** opens on a lively riff with just a tinge of boogie-woogie, then settles into a straight-eighth feel with majestic, flowing harmonies. "The two pieces are related," Kikoski explains. "They reflect the work I've been doing with counterpoint, using different counter-melodies in the left hand." The duo format, however, was something of an accident. "I wasn't sure how I wanted to play these until we got to the studio," Kikoski recalls. "Boris and I started warming up with the first one, to get levels. When we finished we decided to do the other one too. We thought we'd go back later and play them as a trio, but we never did. We didn't need to."

On both DIW dates, Kikoski decided to put several of his older tunes back into circulation. He continues that process of rediscovery here, on the two tracks that feature Seamus

Blake's gutsy, melodic tenor sax. ***Cecilia***, a bright swinging piece with a tricky opening figure, was first heard in 1987 on Ralph Moore's ***623 C Street*** (Criss Cross 1028), a disc that featured Kikoski with rhythm section titans Buster Williams and Billy Hart. ***Harmonizing Instincts***, a ballad with a quasi-rock backbeat, was left in the can along with the rest of Kikoski's second album for Sony Epicure. (Jazz fans ought to root for its eventual release, as it features Dave Holland, Jack DeJohnette, and special guest George Garzone.) '*Instincts*' was always a straight-eighth ballad," says Kikoski, "but Tain plays it completely differently. He really puts his own thing on it."

Which brings us, finally, to the two new trio originals. ***Tamami*** is a sunny theme over an ethereal 16th-note drum feel, with a harmonic structure that pivots between several major and minor tonalities. ***Blues for Us*** flows jauntily in a slow 6/4, its four-plus-two pattern switching seamlessly to waltz time for the piano solo. "I wrote this very quickly for the date," Kikoski remarks. "I wanted to do a blues, but my own kind of blues." By the second chorus going in, Watts is already eager to blow off steam; once Kozlov and Kikoski make their pungent statements, they give the drummer some.

Throughout his still-evolving career, David Kikoski has displayed limitless technical brilliance, to be sure, but also a

sense of youthful excitement and discovery. He may look to Monk, Frank Zappa, and Brian Wilson for inspiration; as he did on 2001's ***Surf's Up***. Or he may summon thunder from the most minimal sketch, as he does on the free pieces found here. ***Combinations*** indeed: we hear strong form and unbounded freedom, from solo to quartet and everything in between. Kikoski knows exactly how to push himself, his colleagues, and last but not never least, his listeners.

David R. Adler
Downbeat, All Music Guide, All About Jazz
New York, NY, August 2002