

Opus 5 Tickle

Co-led jazz groups are sometimes one-offs, maybe pegged to a special occasion, fizzling out even if they do burn brightly for a time. But **Opus 5** defies that expectation: the all-star collective is back with its fourth studio effort, **Tickle**. They've been touring internationally as well. Somehow this band, made up of five of the most in-demand jazz musicians in the world, has persisted and blossomed artistically, as Opus 5's acclaimed tenor saxophonist **Seamus Blake** states: "This might be one of the strongest recordings we've made. You can hear the telepathy in the group and the interplay is on a higher level than ever."

"It's a great feeling to grow together, or maybe now grow old together," jokes bassist **Boris Kozlov**, a veteran of the Grammy-winning Mingus Big Band (which has boasted all of Opus 5 as members). "We're playing with each other all the time," Kozlov adds, "either in bands led by us, or maybe other leaders hire some of us together because we share a common language and have a hookup. So now between ourselves we don't have to discuss things at length. We just get up and play."

"Everyone in the band is a strong composer, so it keeps things fresh," says the quintet's pianist **David Kikoski**, who like Blake is a seasoned **Criss Cross** leader and a standout soloist of his generation. It makes sense that every record, from the 2011 debut **Introducing Opus 5** (Criss 1339) to the follow-ups **Pentasonic** (Criss 1351) and **Progression** (Criss 1369), has focused on original material, even if the first two outings also featured music by Toninho Horta, George Cables, Freddie Hubbard and Charlie Parker.

Trumpeter **Alex Sipiagin**, who came up in Russia with Kozlov (the two left together for New York in 1990), has amassed an extensive Criss Cross discography of his own, not to mention credits with Dave Holland, Michael Brecker, Gonzalo Rubalcaba and many others. Drummer and Opelousas, Louisiana native **Donald Edwards**, whose writing has been a surefire highlight of every Opus 5 CD, debuted as a leader in 2014 with the incredible **Evolution of an Influenced Mind** (Criss 1365). He's also logged Criss Cross appearances with Dayna Stephens, Conrad Herwig, Orrin Evans and Misha Tsiganov.

Tickle leads off with Seamus Blake's ***Silver Pockets***, in a bright feel with a singable, laid-back melody and an irrepressible dancing rhythm. This tune was "the unanimously voted opener on all the gigs on the last tour," according to Kozlov. It certainly recalls the spirit of its dedicatee: the one and only Horace Silver, who died in June of 2014. "He was always one of my heroes," Blake says. "To me he was always funky and melodic and I tried to incorporate his personality in the song." Blake and Sipiagin solo elegantly and also blow together on the outro. Kikoski's turn is intense, a climactic bump before the return of the lovely, restrained head.

Edwards, composer of the title track ***Tickle***, chose the word as "a reference to the

collective feeling that musicians get when something special and organic happens between them on the bandstand or in the studio, when something is not exactly correct, but in that moment it is right!" After an introductory drum solo, the band takes off with a complex unison theme and prescribed rhythmic hits, followed by hard and simpatico grooving on the solos. Kikoski's effortless mix of acoustic and electric piano proves to be a highlight.

"We started thinking that we want to be able to represent this music live, in a real jazz sense, rather than do overdubs," Kikoski says. "On the live gigs I've been using both piano and Rhodes, and I set up so I can reach them both very easily. There are no overdubs, it's all live. I'm trying to come up with different ideas in terms of independence and counterpoint. So there's always one or two on each record where you'll hear acoustic and Rhodes in one take. It's a little characteristic of Opus 5."

Kikoski's *New Old Ballad* is exactly that: "I was listening to an old cassette tape of something I did with the late great Bob Berg. I played in his band for a long time and I produced and arranged his last recording, *Another Standard*. This tape was a rehearsal, and I was working on a ballad back then that I never finished. When I heard it again I was trying to figure out, 'Where did this come from?' I wanted to bring it back to life. So I added two new sections: Boris has such great intonation so I wanted him to play one part with me; and then Seamus would play another with his beautiful sound; and then Alex, who's got such an amazing tone and facility as well. As far as the rhythm, it's a simple tune but there aren't many drummers who could play it like Donald."

Kozlov's *Five Corners*, another Rhodes track, conveys tension and release with its inventive orchestration and subtle shifts in feel. "It's all in 15/4," Kozlov reveals. "Trumpet and piano unison usually brings me back to Randy Brecker's variations on how to give a trumpet melody another color. The meter runs like a common element through different grooves, giving three soloists different characters to work with. Alex has a funkier part, Seamus the waltz and Dave the bluesy ending. It's like life to me: we are who we are and we go through life's permutations carrying ourselves nevertheless."

Sipiagin first recorded *Equilibrium* on his 2004 Criss Cross date *Equilibrium* (Criss 1257), in a sextet version with three horns. Kikoski was the pianist. "We usually talk as a band about the possibility of revisiting old tunes," Sipiagin says. "This one has a different energy with only two horns — the voicings are different and Seamus is on tenor rather than Chris Potter, so it has a different flavor. I never had a chance to play this tune live before, but with Opus 5 I will." The head is dense and contrapuntal, more harmonically involved than the modal solo sections, which feature Blake, Sipiagin and then Kozlov in a deeply felt bass interlude before the head returns (hear Kozlov's impeccable switch to arco in the tune's final moments). Kikoski's solo on the outro vamp is extraordinary: brighter in mood, over a new cycle of chords in assertive waltz time, framing a two-horn theme that adds emotional nuance to an already complex piece.

Edwards' second entry is the swinging, almost soul-jazz inflected ***Crack to the Crevice***, "a reference to how one handles him- or herself in a tight spot, without an outlet or solution on either side, and a feeling of constant unease," the composer explains. Blake and Kozlov state a boppish head in unison, but the piece twists and turns as Rhodes sonorities swirl and other themes emerge and overlap. Sipiagin burns in the pocket at bright midtempo swing, following every hitch in the form before yielding to Blake, who solos over a different, funkier section punched up by Kikoski's Rhodes. As the tune pivots back to swing, Kikoski remains on acoustic and solos with consummate virtuosity and heart. "Both my pieces go back and forth between swing and some kind of groove with a backbeat," says Edwards. "This motif goes on throughout the CD even between tunes."

The closing ballad, Kozlov's ***Murzake***, "is dedicated to my father-in-law, who left the earth around the time of this record date," says the bassist. "The title is his nickname — Murzagali was his name. He was an architect in Almaty, Kazakhstan. The overall mood and bass approach takes inspiration from Charlie Haden, who also left us last year. Murzake was great to me for many years and I was thinking about his spirit and the fragility of life. Aren't we all? I knew that Seamus and Dave would just pour their souls all over it."

"We all love this project and we're trying to build something," Sipiagin remarks about future plans. "I already have an idea for a fifth album, so I'd love to see a five-CD package, like a special edition! We just came back last month from Spain and Portugal — it was a very successful tour, everybody loved the sound. We're looking to get some gigs in Japan and New York." Seems as though Opus 5 is gaining institutional strength, honing a strong identity through years on record and the road. "It's good to keep documenting things together," says Kikoski. "We inspire each other to keep arranging and keep composing."

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