

Seamus Blake/Chris Cheek “Reeds Ramble” Quintet
Let’s Call the Whole Thing Off

Given that their 2014 outing **Reeds Ramble** (Criss 1364) yielded such a fine result, why wouldn’t tenor saxophonists **Seamus Blake** and **Chris Cheek** collaborate again, deepening a partnership that dates back to the 1990s? The co-leaders took a straightforward approach for their follow-up, **Let’s Call the Whole Thing Off**: pick tunes to reflect their varied mutual taste and arrange them for the same formidable band, with **Ethan Iverson** on piano, **Matt Penman** on bass and **Jochen Rueckert** on drums.

While Blake and Cheek stand apart as gifted and incisive soloists, they flourish as a team, bringing luster to every piece with their lyrical unison melodies and deftly harmonized thematic statements. “What’s nice about having two melodic instruments is that sometimes you only need one,” Cheek remarks. “Sometimes it’s nice to not have the harmony. So we experimented with trading off the parts too.” Blake agrees: “Having two tenors is a little less traditional than trumpet and tenor, for instance, so it allows us to throw the melody around or to share roles, harmonizing and ‘melodicizing.’”

Reeds Ramble, as Blake and Cheek like to call this quintet, is not strictly a studio affair. The band played at Smalls in Manhattan the night before the date and ran through the material. At 9am the next morning they were ready. Cheek recalls: “Ethan went straight to the airport from the studio because he was flying to Europe. That was the only time I’ve seen him in sweatpants and tennis shoes.” But despite time pressure and busy schedules, the band delivered in a way that speaks not only to the professionalism but also the creative drive of its members.

Look to the liner notes of the previous album for more commentary on the players, but to recap: Iverson and Rueckert had never appeared on **Criss Cross** before **Reeds Ramble**. They return for **Let’s Call the Whole Thing Off** in exceptional form. So does Penman, who’s done sideman work on the label since 2008. Cheek hails the rhythm section here for its “flowing, solid and interactive sound — they can really lay it down, or they can be more abstract.” “Matt and Jochen have played tons together,” Blake elaborates. “Jochen is very supportive and very clear, he never overplays. Matt is one of the best bass players I know. He’s a great composer, has a great sound and he’s a great soloist. He has exceptional rhythm — he’s often the first guy in the band who can play some really difficult rhythm.”

Iverson is “a great improviser and he’s really courageous too,” says Cheek. “What I love about him is he can be so minimal and sparse at times. When he comps it’s great — he hears everything and he’s able to respond and feed ideas, knows when not to play.” Blake adds: “Ethan makes non-obvious choices and he makes orchestral choices. He doesn’t play with ego and flash in mind.”

The opening piano flourish and rubato underscoring on **Let’s Call the Whole Thing Off**, the leadoff track, certainly bears out what the co-leaders say about Iverson’s taste and timing. This Gershwin classic needs little setup, but it’s specifically the 1957 version from ***Ella and Louis Again*** that inspired this take. Cheek chose the tune, introductory verse and all, knowing the two tenors would revel in its conversational back-and-forth. Blake solos first, in the left channel, over a midtempo swing feel underlined by Rueckert’s impeccable brushes. Cheek and Iverson follow in laid-back but increasingly adventurous style, locking in with Rueckert (now on sticks) as the

clever form unfolds (34 bars, à la the canonical “I Got Rhythm”). Note Blake’s half-step displacement of the melody going out, and Iverson’s effortlessly canny response.

Choro Blanco, a Blake original, came to life as a homework assignment. Both Blake and Cheek, as it happens, were taking a composition class taught by their colleague Guillermo Klein, the brilliant Argentine bandleader. “One of the class assignments was to write a choro,” Blake remembers. The resulting bright and infectious theme sets up an inspired round of soloing from Blake, Cheek and finally Rueckert. “It’s in a tricky key and it’s fast,” Cheek offers. “It has a really interesting form and the lines themselves are really challenging to play on the instrument. It’s exciting and fun to blow on.”

One must listen closely for it, but Cheek’s original **Lunar** is loosely based on Miles Davis’s *Solar*. Iverson begins with an almost spooky rubato prelude before setting up the moderate straight-eighth feel for the band entrance. Tenors intone the legato melody in unison. Blake solos first with great fluidity and fire, yielding to energized and evocative statements from Cheek and Iverson in turn. “It’s something I was messing around with,” Cheek says of the tune. “I liked the way the harmony keeps climbing — it has this cyclical thing which just keeps kind of ascending. I thought it was somehow dark and bright at the same time.”

The quintet’s reading of **La Canción que Falta** by Guillermo Klein is a high point of beauty on the album. Loosely translated as “the song that is missing,” this piece typically features two trumpets on the melody and features the composer himself on vocals. “I’ve played it a couple of times with Guillermo and Chris has too,” says Blake, who brought it in. “I was trying to find something that was a little less obviously jazz, something that had kind of a rock feel. I think for a long time Guillermo had trouble writing this, he started and finally finished it years later, hence the title ‘song that is missing.’”

According to Cheek, Klein’s lyrics tell the story of a man who sees a woman smile at him as she passes by. The man, being a musician, wants to give her a song, one that’s already there for that moment but hasn’t been written yet, exactly the song that is needed, one that will be enough to win her over. Cheek continues: “The song is kind of bare; harmonically it’s very unornamented. It’s a song that asks you to be true to it and respect it, and try to give something to it. Because the song itself is about giving something that is needed.”

Limehouse Blues, dating back to 1922, has had an interesting life as an uptempo jazz standard that can naturally serve as a country-guitar barnburner. Cheek borrowed from the version that appears on *Me and Chet*, the 1972 outing by dueling six-stringers Chet Atkins and Jerry Reed (a follow-up to 1970’s *Me and Jerry*). “The [1959] version with Cannonball and Coltrane is classic,” Cheek says. “This one is in a different key and it’s a different arrangement. One night at Smalls I was telling Seamus about the tune, and the next night I brought it in. I had basically transcribed it, and it just stayed in the book.”

Surfboard, another of Cheek’s picks, is by the late Antonio Carlos Jobim. “I love how the rhythm and harmony carry over the bar line,” Cheek comments. “You have this groove and then you have this other thing that floats over it. It really does sound like you’re riding a wave. On the original recording there are no saxes, but instead voices, and the harmony is quite thick. I picked out harmony parts I thought would work, and the lower voice changes throughout the course of the tune.”

Count Your Blessings, the Irving Berlin ballad from the 1954 film *White Christmas*, was recorded by Sonny Rollins soon after in 1956. But the inspiration for this two-tenor version is the vocal duet from the movie by Bing Crosby and Rosemary Clooney. In that sense it's not unlike the Ella and Louis vibe on **Let's Call the Whole Thing Off**, though Berlin's lyrics go beyond the novelty of "to-may-toe/to-mah-toe" and end up "expressing a deep sentiment," in Cheek's words. ("When my bankroll is getting small/I think of when I had none at all/And I fall asleep, counting my blessings.")

A Little Evil is another Chet Atkins guitar vehicle, this one from the 1963 album *Teen Scene*. The feel is straight boogaloo à la mid-'60s Blue Note, but the guitar-centric source material gives the Blake-Cheek reading another flavor. "The great guitarist Jim Campilongo turned me onto *Teen Scene*," Cheek explains. "This was another two-guitar melody line that I thought would sound cool on saxophones." According to Blake, "What I like about it is there's a nice simplicity to it. Nowadays it's common to make everything sound hard and kind of alienating [*laughs*]. So that was Chris's smart move to pull out some of those tunes. It's nice to hunt for material that people don't play all the time. Chris and I are similar in that way: we like a lot of different things, and we like the music to reflect that."

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