

Seamus Blake/Chris Cheek Quintet **Reeds Ramble**

It's been a minute, as jazz musicians like to say, since fellow saxophonists **Seamus Blake** and **Chris Cheek** worked together in **The Bloomdaddies** (Criss 1110), a groove-oriented project with electric bass and (eventually) two drummers. Blake and Cheek gave their "gearlust" (Blake's word) free rein and played tenors through heavy effects — wah-wah pedals, delays, fuzztones to simulate the harmonic imprint of a keyboard or guitar. Blake doesn't shrink from the term rock 'n' roll to describe the band.

"We did some early demo of us playing," says Blake, "and it was a bit more on the jazz side. I think we did 'Tenderly,' stuff like that. Acoustic jazz, though some of the tunes we wrote for it were more groove-oriented." Now, having thrived as leaders, sidemen, big band soloists and contributors to the creative health of the jazz scene for some 20 years, Blake and Cheek meet again. The result is this memorable session, **Reeds Ramble**, which revisits the acoustic two-tenor concept that gave the Bloomdaddies their start.

"Seamus has always been one of my favorite musicians and saxophone players," says Cheek. "I met him in Boston — we were both at Berklee at the same time. He's a big inspiration to me. His command of the instrument is so deep and inspiring and motivating."

"I know Chris from college days," Blake affirms. "I was 17 or so. I guess he's a year and a half or two years older than me. We had some experiences playing together in Herb Pomeroy's big band and some ensembles in school. I admired his playing. It was different than other people because he seemed to have different influences. He was very much his own personality already formed. He was very melodic, and young players at that age are usually not so melodic. I was always a big fan."

Along with the deep rapport of the co-leaders, **Reeds Ramble** benefits from the unique presence of pianist **Ethan Iverson**, making his first Criss Cross appearance. Most renowned for his work with The Bad Plus, Iverson has also been busy with Billy Hart, Albert "Tootie" Heath, Lee Konitz and others, and his prolific must-read work as a jazz scholar at his blog Do The Math has garnered wide attention and acclaim. Cheek remembers: "I met Ethan at a Jamey Aebersold camp, I want to say 25 years ago? Outside of Chicago. He's one of those musicians who takes things in a different direction and it's always a real lift." Blake concurs: "Ethan doesn't play the typical [ideas]. He reaches into pianistic classical things, he's adventurous and plays very compositionally."

On bass is New Zealand native **Matt Penman**, a member of the SFJazz Collective and the all-star quartet James Farm, not to mention a valued presence on recent Criss Cross sessions led by Jonathan Kreisberg, John Ellis and Zach Brock. Interestingly, Penman featured Cheek on his 2002 leader debut *The Unquiet*, and then featured Blake on the 2008 follow-up *Catch of the Day*. "Matt is top-tier," Blake declares. "He plays the bass great, he's also brilliant and funny. He's a great soloist and he added some helpful things at the session when we needed ideas for arrangements."

Drummer **Jochen Rueckert**, Blake adds, is someone "I've known for a long time. He's leading his own band and he's really versatile: he plays great rock, he programs crazy bizarre electronic music and he's an exceptional jazz drummer, he can play anything. In the last year or so I've played a fair amount with him. He listens and he has a lot of

resources. We didn't just want to make a bebop record, so we tried to have tunes by different composers and showcase different things we like. There's Brazilian music, a little bit of funk, a little rock 'n' roll, some bebop and ballads. For Jochen all those things are no problem. He connects right away and sounds great on it." Rueckert also makes his Criss Cross debut here.

Na Carreira, by eminent Brazilian composer Chico Buarque, was a pick of Cheek's to lead off the album. The melodic push-and-pull is immediately inviting. (Blake is on the left channel, Cheek on the right.) "I was in Portugal and a friend of mine gave me a bunch of Brazilian music," Cheek explains. "One day I had iTunes on shuffle and that song came up — it just grabbed me and I couldn't stop listening to it. I transcribed it, played it a few times in a small group and it sounded OK, but on the original recording there are two voices, Chico Buarque and Edu Lobo. I thought it was interesting how they traded phrases and sang in unison at points, a simple but strong idea I thought would sound good with the horns." Blake remarks that Cheek's arrangement is "almost like some Tin Pan Alley duet. Chris always keeps things kind of light, keeps a sense of humor."

1974 Blues, by saxophone icon Eddie Harris, is Blake's choice. "I don't think that tune is played very much," he says. "I did a couple of Eddie Harris birthday tribute nights at Smoke a couple years in a row, so I've been going through his music and looking for material. That was one that stood out to me." Cheek adds: "Seamus and I both love Eddie Harris and the whole blues/R&B saxophone tradition, which parallels jazz." There's a "Sidewinder"-ish boogaloo energy to the tune although it's in 7/4, providing both tenors and then Rueckert a chance to stretch over an asymmetric beat.

Holodeck Waltz, by veteran pianist/keyboardist Jim Beard, finds Cheek switching to soprano and Iverson doing breathtaking work to bring the orchestration to new levels. When Beard recorded this on his 1990 debut for CTI he had none other than Wayne Shorter on soprano. He revisited the piece on *Revolutions*, his 2009 collaboration with Vince Mendoza. "Seamus' arrangement kind of condensed the multilayered original version," says Cheek. "There's a lot going on. He condensed the essential ideas, melodies and background parts for the two horns. It's quite involved." As Blake recounts, "I just loved the tune and thought I'd transcribe it. It took me forever and a day. It's not like taking down a lead sheet."

Blue Moose is a Cheek original that refers to one of Blake's common nicknames: Moose. "I like country music a lot, and I was listening to this guy Elton Britt, they call him the yodeling cowboy or something," Cheek says. "That sound was in my ear. It was a kind of yodeling influence [*laughs*] because of the bigger intervals. Seamus is from Canada and we always tease him about being a "mountie" from Canada in the woods or whatever. The name just seemed right."

De Dah, by unsung piano great Elmo Hope, received its most famous treatment on a 1953 Clifford Brown session. "Normally people play on rhythm changes but we decided to play on the changes of the actual head, which are a bit trickier," Blake says. When Cheek begins the rotation and Blake follows, one can hear back-to-back their routes through those "trickier" changes, their rhythmic personalities and deep feel for the pocket — in short, their distinctive approaches to the music. Iverson follows, taking a scalpel to the A sections every time through the form and giving way to Penman's adroit solo before the head returns.

Till I Die is another Blake choice, a classic by the legendary Brian Wilson of the Beach Boys. “We played around with it for a while,” Blake recalls. “Tunes like this take more work — you can’t just play it with a jazz combo feel. Jochen gets into a nice rock thing at the end, it gets kind of heated. And Ethan does his deconstructive modern classical rendition of things. I think there’s a sophistication in Brian Wilson’s music. He makes unusual and interesting modulations. He’s got a great melodic and harmonic sense that sometimes works with more of a jazz approach.”

Thelonious Monk played the standard ***I Surrender Dear*** unaccompanied on his 1957 masterpiece *Brilliant Corners*. Cheek brought in the tune and, according to Blake, he “wrote out some of the left-hand stuff that Monk plays, which we have the tenors doing.” The way Blake and Cheek trade phrases on the melody recalls the opening ***Na Carreira***. “Some of the 6th intervals make me think of some Italian aria, Puccini or something,” Blake adds with a laugh.

Blake’s original ***All About Me***, based on “All of Me” changes, starts with a charged Latin-tinged drum statement, a brisk and challenging unison line and a bass solo to kick off the rotation. Iverson follows and only then do the two tenors have their say, Blake then Cheek. “I tried to write a simple almost bebop type of head,” Blake says. “Onstage I like to dedicate this to the Facebook generation, taking selfies and posting their twerking videos to Instagram.”

Lady In Languor is by Canadian composer Vickie Yang. “I’ve done some different projects with Vickie and I played this song a little bit on my own gigs,” Blake offers. “I was looking for some balance. I wanted harmony that was not songbook kind of harmony but more modern — not functional Jerome Kern harmony, a little more abstract. It’s a succinct tune and like it because it has a special, spacious kind of sound.”

The cutting session of old may have its musical benefits, but it’s not what animates **Reeds Ramble**, says Blake: “Playing with Chris is fun. He’s kind of Zen, he listens a lot. He’s very ego-less and it’s not a battle in that way, although he does inspire me to play my best. With Chris it’s easy to focus on music and not worry about less important things like who took the best solo, or who got the most house at the club. I also think we have similar tastes, we play things outside of jazz. It’s like two chefs who agree on how much salt should go in the stock.”

David R. Adler
New York, December 2013