

## Tim Warfield **Eye of the Beholder**

The band lineup on **Eye of the Beholder**, Tim Warfield's seventh recording as a leader for **Criss Cross**, has a long and serious history. Pianist **Cyrus Chestnut** and drummer **Clarence Penn** go back to the beginning: they appeared on Warfield's 1994 debut **A Cool Blue** (Criss 1102) as well as the 1995 follow-up **A Whisper in the Midnight** (Criss 1122). Trumpeter **Nicholas Payton**, along with Chestnut and Penn, played on Warfield's **Gentle Warrior** (Criss 1149) and **Jazz Is...** (Criss 1227). Payton also employed Warfield as the tenor saxophonist in his own acclaimed quintet from the mid-'90s into the early '00s.

One of the finest but least hyped tenor and soprano players of his generation, Warfield refers repeatedly to this lineup simply as "the band." Far from a hastily assembled (and just as quickly disassembled) roster of greats, it's a working unit with years of shared experience and a future still in front of it. "As strong as they are individually," Warfield says of his colleagues, "collectively it's like the Avengers or something. It was like breathing with a lot of extra oxygen."

On the recent discs **One for Shirley** (Criss 1304) and **A Sentimental Journey** (Criss 1324), Warfield took a break from the quintet/sextet lineups of his earlier releases and focused instead on an organ group with Hammond B3 virtuoso Pat Bianchi. **Eye of the Beholder** is a return to "the band," but also a strong sign of where its players are today. "After the first couple of notes of the first couple of takes," Warfield recalls, "it was like, 'Oh yeah. This is what we do. I forgot we did this.' You could hear all of the maturity from everyone as we've grown. You could hear all these other musical experiences that have influenced how we play. I could hear Cyrus, but it was Cyrus to the tenth power. Same thing with Clarence. I've always wanted to play with [bassist] **Rodney Whitaker** — he had just played on my Christmas record, we'd just gotten out of the studio one month before. And Nicholas, he just came in and we did what we do. That made it a really gratifying experience."

The opener, **Blues for Mr. Bill**, is on one level a straightforward midtempo blues, set up in explosive fashion by Whitaker and Penn alone up front. Warfield plays a simple soulful line in F, but the track quickly begins to dart in all directions, with Payton playing counter-themes in A major and Chestnut brilliantly exploiting this bitonal discord as a foundation for the piece. Warfield tosses a "Dixie" quote into his solo, if you listen closely. And Payton uses parts of his melody from **The Backwards Step**, heard later in this set, as a means to break the blues form wide open.

As for the elusive "Mr. Bill," Warfield explains: "It's a musical parody of an impromptu comedic skit that happened when I was working for Bill Cosby." In the early '90s Warfield played in the house band for an updated, Cosby-hosted version of *You Bet Your Life*, the Marx Brothers-era TV quiz show. "Terrell [Stafford, trumpeter] and I were performing with [organ legend] Shirley Scott, Mickey Roker on drums, Arthur Harper on bass and Tony Williams [not the famed Miles Davis drummer] on alto. We ran out of reels, and when it was time to change reels the band had to play to entertain the audience. [So one day] Shirley was playing, and man she was gettin' down, playing some blues. Bill walks over to Shirley and points at her, tells her to get up! He was shaking his head, like 'Nah, she doesn't know what she's doing.'"

Cosby made a show of sitting down at the organ, Warfield continues, “and what came out of that organ was how it sounds on the beginning of **Blues for Mr. Bill**. You had this musical center, and all of a sudden you ended up with some other idea about how jazz is supposed to be played. It was quite clear that Bill did not know how to play the organ. But it was so funny that it was actually a stimulus for me to write this tune.”

**The Undaunted** is a Warfield original and a personal and artistic credo as well. It’s a part of this band’s repertoire from the very first gig, Warfield notes. It was also the title track of a 1993 album by trumpeter Marlon Jordan. “It’s really about a mindset that one must have to play this music,” Warfield says. “You’ve got to be fearless and just do what you do. Individuality is an absolutely dire necessity to play this music, and the hardest thing to do is to acquire your own voice. Before we get to any idea of innovation ... we have to come up with our own voice. It’s really embracing the idea of becoming you, so that you can blossom. And not being afraid to be that, because that’s what we all should be striving to do whether we’re talking about music or otherwise.”

The **Tied a Dish** interludes, clearly the freest pieces of the set, are “pretty much cued improvisations,” Warfield says. “I cued everybody with body movements: I do this, you do that, and if you hear anything in between, play it. The pivotal musical idea to get it to change texturally was to scream ‘Tied a Dish!’ Just interject it at times, when you felt it. It was all about how we felt at the time.” Asked if the screams are from everyone, Warfield assures, “It was *all* of us. That was a requirement.”

What does “tied a dish” mean? “I had to make Cyrus say it over and over again fast,” Warfield recalls, “and finally he was like, ‘Oh...’” The play on words (“tired of this,” with an extra four-letter word implied) is Warfield’s invention, and in his view “it represents the ‘push me-pull you’ struggle for change currently happening within the human condition. In the cyber age, particularly with social media, society has become more undaunted when being verbal about their convictions. I think ‘Tied a dish’ exemplifies the vortex of this struggle for change between old-guard traditions and new-guard concepts. It represents the agitation we have, the result of not necessarily agreeing all the time, as we try to come to some terms of resolution and or compromise. That’s what I hope to project as the essence of this tune.”

**I Remember You**, the 1941 Schertzinger/Mercer standard (and unforgettable Charlie Parker vehicle), gets an upbeat 5/4 treatment here, with a beautiful unaccompanied tenor introduction. Solos by Warfield, Payton and Chestnut lead to a tremendous drum feature on the vamp going out. Payton’s angular choices on bridge of the last head recall some of the dissonance heard on **Blues for Mr. Bill**. “I played this tune with my organ group,” Warfield notes. “It’s something I heard — it’s got a Trane change implication over the vamp. Clarence destroyed it.”

**The Backwards Step** is a Payton original, a signature piece in fact, from the trumpeter’s 2008 opus *Into the Blue* (though Warfield performed it with the trumpeter years before it was recorded). “I always liked the tune,” Warfield says. “I’ve always liked melodies that one could sing. There’s nothing wrong with writing compositions and I’ve written a few of those, but I believe in all honesty they’re for the classroom. I believe the focus should be on the improvisation itself. And I thought this was a great tune — once you play it, it’s very difficult for it to leave your head. And it allows for collective improvisation of all types.”

***Ramona's Heart***, Warfield's sumptuous original ballad, is not only a tenor feature but a look into Chestnut's extraordinary sensitivity as an accompanist. "He's a painter," says Warfield. "When I say 'painter,' people think I'm speaking only about his harmonic choices. I mean rhythmically. The way Cyrus juxtaposes chords, the way he plays rhythms, really dictates how the band is going to play melodies collectively."

The song itself was inspired by "someone I met while I was doing the *Cosby* show, and I guess I had a crush," Warfield offers. "Her disposition motivated me to strive to be a better person. I wrote this song and it's based on a feeling — there's a lot of optimism, but there is also melancholy. It's not a really difficult song, but it's not easy either, because it can easily be overplayed. It captures how I felt emotionally, which was all over the place. Experiencing an amalgam of emotions, I realized I was not only intrigued by this person of great beauty, but by her complex personality."

***Second Thoughts*** is a tribute to Mulgrew Miller. The arrangement starts softly and grows, burning in a medium swing feel that prompts inspired flights from tenor, trumpet and piano as well as bass. "It's Mulgrew's tune and I've played it with him on more than one occasion," says Warfield. "Mulgrew's musical conception has been so influential for piano players who don't even realize that they're playing some of his conception. I thought it was very important to do something that was his."

***Forever, One Day at a Time***, calm and legato with muted trumpet, yields yet another example of Chestnut as master accompanist, tailoring every response under the solos by Warfield and Payton. This closing track is "about the concept of heaven," Warfield says. "What is heaven like? You get all these descriptions from everyone who hasn't been there yet. If it's something that's incessant, then can we come up with a musical idea that represents that sort of beauty and peace, that sort of harmony? I tried to write a song that exemplifies that, all the way up to that very final chord."

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