

Al Foster ***Inspirations & Dedications***

Al Foster's recorded output as a leader may not be voluminous, but one should never mistake this for inactivity. For some two decades the master drummer has led a great working band, developing a distinctive body of music on gig after gig. He debuted in 1978 with the Japan-only, heavily electric release *Mixed Roots*. But his current acoustic small-group conception was first documented on *Brandyn* from 1996, with Chris Potter on saxophones, David Kikoski on piano and Doug Weiss on bass. Weiss has remained in Foster's lineups through thick and thin. Saxophonist Eli Degibri succeeded Potter in 1999, and with pianist Kevin Hays they made Foster's inspiring *Love, Peace, and Jazz!* (2008), recorded live at the Village Vanguard. (Pianists Aaron Goldberg and George Colligan have worked with Foster as well.)

On *Inspirations & Dedications* we hear Foster in a quintet setting with another great find, his pianist of the last 10 years, the remarkable Adam Birnbaum. Saxophonist Dayna Stephens, tapped for the band three years ago, has a warm, husky tone and adventurous harmonic instincts to perfectly suit Foster's music, in which the tenor has always played a central role. "I've always wanted to be in Al's band," Stephens admits. "Like many of us, I grew up listening to him. The cat's beat is just so uniquely his own. He's got that thing all the masters have, a loose precision. He sits behind the drums with his cymbals pretty high, so depending on where you're standing you don't even get to really see him. It was like a big mystery being unveiled."

Trumpeter Jeremy Pelt, no doubt deeply aware of Foster's importance in the trumpet lineage through his work with Blue Mitchell and Miles Davis, brings a wealth of musicianship and spirit to complete the front line. "No matter the setting, Al is always swinging with a deep groove," Pelt offers. "It only made sense that Miles would choose to take him outside of swing into his more funk-related music, because Al is a complete master at laying the foundation. The thing that was so eye-opening about working on this record was Al's compositional skills, which for whatever reason I had largely slept on. The greatest drummers think compositionally, and Al certainly falls in line with the lineage."

Foster's intent with *Inspirations & Dedications* is giving back: honoring jazz greats who've sustained him in his career, but most of all showing boundless love to family members. Each of the Foster originals has a dedicatee: his wife of 41 years, Bonnie Rose; his four daughters (Kierra, Simone, Michelle and Monique); his late son Brandyn; his grandson Jazzon; even himself, "Aloysius" Foster, born 1943 in Richmond, Virginia. And Doug Weiss, practically a family member by now, gets a tune as well, the instantly memorable "Douglas" (which Weiss and Foster also recorded with the Jorge Rossy Vibes Quintet, on the album *Beyond Sunday*).

Inspirations & Dedications begins and ends with non-originals, however: "Cantaloupe Island" and "Jean-Pierre," by Herbie Hancock and Miles Davis respectively. Foster worked extensively with both these legends, and with Davis during two distinct periods

in fact: the mid-'70s as successor to Jack DeJohnette for *On the Corner*, *In Concert*, *Get Up With It*, *Agharta*, *Pangea* and *Dark Magus*; and the early '80s, following Davis' career hiatus, on the comeback albums *The Man with the Horn*, *We Want Miles*, *Star People*, *Decoy* and *You're Under Arrest*. These credits would be enough to secure any drummer's place in jazz history, but Foster's history goes deeper still.

"I come from another generation," he says. "I was very fortunate to play with almost everybody. I'm talking about great people walking the planet. I mean, I was the young guy sitting there and they were like God to me." Examples include Dexter Gordon, Sonny Rollins, Donald Byrd, Bobby Hutcherson, Hank Jones, Tommy Flanagan, McCoy Tyner and a great many more.

Alongside his peers, including fellow Miles Davis alumnus David Liebman, Foster became part of a surging late '70s New York scene, immortalized on such albums as Liebman's *Pendulum*. In the early '90s he appeared on Joe Henderson's *So Near, So Far (Musings for Miles)* alongside John Scofield and Dave Holland, topping the *Billboard* jazz album charts. With Joe Lovano in the tenor spot this group became ScoLoHoFo, which released *Oh!* in 2003 (the drum solo on Holland's "The Winding Way" is a highlight). These were major signposts in a career with countless other record dates, each one marked by Foster's luminous sense of swing.

For all of this, Foster is thankful most of all to his drum idols and mentors: "I was in love with Max Roach, Philly [Joe Jones], Buhaina [Art Blakey], Art Taylor," he says. "I knew all of those people at a young age." Doug Weiss elaborates: "Art Taylor's mother used to live in the building next door. Al would follow A.T., clocking his movements, mode of dress and manners." Absorbing lessons from masters on and off the bandstand, he set a goal for himself: improve enough to play with them, hoping it'll rub off. By age 16 he was playing trio with Larry Willis and Eddie Gomez. He debuted on record at 20, as Aloysius Foster, on Blue Mitchell's *The Thing to Do*, playing alongside Chick Corea and making his mark with what Weiss calls "the 'Fungii Mama' beat," referring to the infectious calypso hi-hat cymbal lope that underpins the album's opening track. Weiss again: "Blue stopped the band one night and said, 'Al, that's it! Don't forget that one.'"

He didn't forget it — "Fungii Mama" remains in Foster's repertoire to this day. On *Inspirations & Dedications* it's "Cantaloupe Island" and "Jean-Pierre" that foreground the idiosyncratic groove element in his playing. The latter occasions an incisively bluesy Pelt solo and an adventurous turn from Stephens, supported by Birnbaum's deft harmonic responses. Herbie's classic gets a strong, rhythmically unsettled piano intro — somehow it settles just in time to hit the famous riff and cue the band, like the runway suddenly appearing out the plane window when you're getting concerned there's nowhere to land.

Foster's tunes have an economical, deeply expressive feel, gained through hours of effort. Weiss describes Foster's process as "talking to the piano. Praying for guidance in finding his own sound. Persevering. Playing chess with the piano." This method was thrust upon Foster, one could say. He did not take private lessons or learn to read

music. “His father was musically inclined,” Weiss says, “an amateur bassist in fact, and bought Al his first set of drums, but that was about it.”

Undeterred, Foster has gone on to write “in such a pure way,” says Birnbaum, “since he doesn't approach the piano with theoretical concepts in mind. He simply finds melodies and bass lines at the piano, 100 percent by ear. It takes years sometimes for one tune to fully develop, but the result is a truly honest and direct expression of Al as a musician. Unique, beautiful melodies and structures that don't sound quite like any other composer in jazz.”

A fine example is “Ooh, What You Do to Me” (a second dedication to Bonnie Rose), which Birnbaum, Weiss and Foster also picked to close out their 2015 trio release *Three of a Mind*. Bass and piano start in a tight unison here, setting the feel in motion before Pelt and Stephens enter in rich harmony. There's a deep soul-music aspect to the song, with a Latin tinge as well, almost reminiscent of CTI's heyday. Stephens' harmonic depth and velvet-glove attack, Pelt's adroit staccato phrases and the way Foster reacts to them, the blazing melodic path of Birnbaum's solo: Foster's writing has a way of bringing all this out. And the dialogue sustains itself throughout *Inspirations & Dedications*. “Al lives and breathes the music,” says Birnbaum, “and when things are happening in the band he's on cloud nine. He truly plays *with* the band, meaning every note he plays is a reaction to what he hears.”

The songs for the four daughters play out almost as a single statement of fatherly love, from the gliding 6/8 of “Simone's Dance” to the lyrical lilt of “Samba de Michelle”; to “Kierra,” with its stately minor cadences and modulations (this one also appeared on Jorge Rossy's *Beyond Sunday*); to “Song for Monique” with Stephens switching to baritone sax for an even rounder and more striking tone. First appearing on 1996's *Brandyn* as “No Title,” the song became a favorite of Monique's and ultimately took on her name.

“Brandyn,” too, was written out of love for family, but after Brandyn's passing in January 2017 at age 30 it conveys a note of tragic loss. The mournful ballad “Our Son” is another powerful testament of Foster's love for Brandyn as well as Bonnie Rose, Brandyn's mother. And in the slow, relaxed feel and melodic whimsy of “Jazzon,” titled for Brandyn's son (now age 12), the album finds a ray of hope, celebrating youthful promise and reminding us that music can heal and keep us whole. Brandyn named Jazzon specifically in tribute to the boy's grandfather, a living embodiment of jazz, whose work continues as a blessing to us all.

—David R. Adler