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BOXED SET



Classic Vanguard Small Group Swing Sessions **Various (Mosaic)** by Ken Dryden

This set of small group swing sessions is the first Mosaic volume of a series of jazz recordings produced by John Hammond for Vanguard Records. The excellent acoustics of the recording venue, Masonic Temple in Brooklyn, plus their single microphone technique, produced numerous 10- and 12-inch records between 1953-58, when the project concluded, though using only one microphone occasionally caused balance issues. One of the strengths of the date was that the musicians had plenty of freedom to record any repertoire of their choosing and how long they wanted to play, acknowledging the fifteen minute maximum for 10-inch records.

Trombonist Vic Dickenson's 1953 recording launched the new series, a solid effort with veterans including Edmond Hall (clarinet) and Sir Charles Thompson (piano), the up-and-coming Ruby Braff (trumpet), Steve Jordan (rhythm guitar), the inimitable Walter Page (bass) and the obscure Les Erskine (drums). For musicians who were used to the time limits of 78rpm discs, they faced the challenge of not running out of ideas, which rarely occurs, except on the overextended "Jeepers Creepers". An overall strong session, the leisurely stroll through "I Cover the Waterfront" is an obvious highlight, with thoughtful solos by Braff, Hall and Thompson. Dickenson's follow up septet substituted Shad Collins for Braff and ("Papa") Jo Jones for Erskine. The trombonist's muted horn gives a foot-tapping rendition of the 1860s ballad "When You and I Were Young, Maggie", with Page's prominent bass lines providing its strong pulse. The traditional jazz interplay is spirited in the septet's rendition of "Nice Work If You Can Get It", with Thompson taking solo honors.

Braff was rewarded with a date of his own in 1955. The young trumpeter is a confident leader, surrounded by veterans in Dickenson, Page and Jones, plus pianist Nat Pierce and an old friend, clarinetist-tenor saxophonist Sam Margolis. The leader's bright tone and ability to caress a melody always helped him fit in with older players. His upbeat setting of Lil Green's "Romance in the Dark", and engaging riff tune "Where's Freddie", indicate a musician playing beyond his years. Pianist Thompson's 1953 session includes Joe Newman (trumpet), Benny Powell (trombone) and Pete Brown (alto), along with Gene Ramey (bass) and Osie Johnson (drums). The bandleader's "Bop This" successfully blends swing and bop in a breezy setting, while Newman's sassy "Oh Joe!" displays his chops and the laid back, soft side of Brown, in one of his last appearances due to declining health. A Thompson date from the following year has an impressive front line, including Coleman Hawkins (tenor), Earle Warren (alto), Emmett Berry (trumpet) and Benny Morton (trombone). Hawkins' sonorous tenor dominates "It's the Talk of the Town", with the remaining songs being the pianist's originals. "Fore!" is a lively riff tune that inspires the soloists,

backed by the undercurrent of guitarist Jordan, bassist Aaron Bell and drummer Johnson.

Trumpeter Newman's session features several fellow Basie bandmates, including saxophonist-flutists Frank Wess and Frank Foster and bassist Eddie Jones, along with pianist Johnny Acea and Johnson. The jazz rhumba "Jose Beguines" (credited to Johnson and Newman) is packed with inventive solos and strong ensembles. Trumpeter Buck Clayton, another Basie veteran, shares the spotlight with Braff in a swing session with Morton and tenor saxophonist Buddy Tate. Clayton was already comfortable with the longer recording times, never adding unnecessary choruses. "I Can't Get Started" is a great example, with Clayton soloing first as Braff plays muted horn in the background, paving the way for Tate's lush tenor, then Braff's expressive solo. A Clayton session from 1957 with Dickenson and Warren has a superb rhythm section, with the always inspired Hank Jones (piano), along with the young Kenny Burrell (guitar), Aaron Bell (bass) and Jo Jones (drums). There are several strong originals by the bandleader and a swaggering take of Fats Waller's "Squeeze Me" that features pianist Jones.

Jo Jones led his own date with Berry (trumpet), Bennie Green (trombone), Lucky Thompson (tenor), Freddie Green (guitar) and Walter Page (bass). Count Basie is the pianist for the two takes of "Shoe Shine Boy"; he was invited to attend, then sat in. The magic of the famous Basie rhythm section provides ample stimulation for the soloists. Nat Pierce is on the remaining tracks, showing off a bit of stride piano in "Lincoln Heights". This date is easily one of the top Vanguard jazz releases. Vocalist (Little) Jimmy Rushing merited three different record dates, although the results are mixed. The first, with pianist Sammy Price, Page and Jo Jones, and a front line with Tate (tenor) and Henderson Chambers (trombone), includes songs he sang while with Basie and a pair of originals co-written with Price: the sinewy blues "How Do Want Your Lovin' Done" and the loping "Leave Me". Rushing is in great form throughout. A session from the next year replaces Price with Pete Johnson, adding Lawrence Brown (trombone), Rudy Powell (alto, clarinet) and Freddie Green (guitar). Much of the material is familiar from Rushing's earlier records, excepting the boogie-woogie "Roll' Em Pete", a feature for the pianist, with Rushing shouting encouragement. The sound is a bit muddy in the vocalist's "Rock and Roll", which alternates between boogie-woogie and swing, though the energy is never in doubt.

The final session is an oddity, seemingly leaning a bit to rock 'n roll. While the horn front line of Berry, Dickenson and Tate shine, Marlowe Morris' mediocre organ playing and the unsatisfactory contributions of two obscure players, pianist Clarence Johnson and guitarist Roy Gaines, prove distracting. The final disc was recorded live at Count Basie's nightclub, resulting in some sacrificed fidelity. The musicians include Berry, Dickenson, bassist Aaron Bell, drummer Bobby Donaldson, the obscure pianist Bobby Henderson, plus organist Morris. The added bonus is several vocals by Joe Williams, with Basie taking over for Henderson on "Sent for You Yesterday". The playing of Morris is, once again, inadequate; Basie was a far better organist.

As expected, Mosaic's packaging is first rate, with Thomas W. Cunliffe's detailed, informative liner notes and numerous period photographs of the musicians.

For more info visit mosaicrecords.com