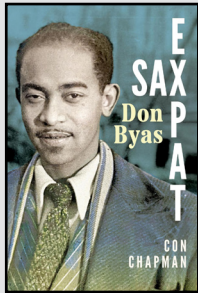


IN PRINT



Sax Expat: Don Byas
Con Chapman (University Press of Mississippi)
by Marilyn Lester

After an impressive biography on alto genius, Johnny Hodges, author Con Chapman has written an equally deep dive into the life and career of tenor saxophonist Don Byas, in a tightly-written, 233 pages (about 179 of them text and the rest supporting material). In *Sax Expat: Don Byas*, Chapman deftly cuts to the chase about his subject, a man worthy of admiration, and who, as the author sites in the prologue, had a lifelong desire to “create his own identity, in equal parts romantic and noble.” There’s a single page preamble and window into the text: “I love beauty, Don Byas.” Fifteen chapters then unfold, with an easy flow and graceful writing, which lays out a clear, cradle to grave recounting of Byas’ life, making a case for his musical contributions and rightful place in jazz history, heretofore denied him. Underappreciated, the book offers a bright light shined on Byas’ musical worth, from his technical

brilliance, sound and tone, to the saxophonist’s superlative, innovative harmonic approach.

Byas was born Carlos Wesley “Don” Byas in Muskogee, OK, on October 21, 1912, eventually making his way to NYC and becoming a significant player, collaborating with the likes of Count Basie, Dizzy Gillespie and Thelonious Monk. But then, in 1946, came a move to Europe, diminishing his visibility stateside, leading to missed opportunities to record and thus establish a tangible, forever legacy on vinyl. The question for Chapman was: why such a drastic life decision? With fascinating research and analysis, he cites the move as motivated by the artistic freedom available to a Black musician in Europe; to those who cited racial discrimination as a prime reason, Byas himself maintained that discrimination had “nothing to do with it.” And that statement might have weight. Byas had a difficult personality and was given to drinking and erratic behavior in the US. He was transformed in Europe, finding “peace and contentment as a family man in the Netherlands” with his second wife, Johanna Eksteen, and their four children. Byas returned to the US only once—to perform at the Newport Jazz Festival with Dizzy Gillespie in 1970. In 1972, he died in Amsterdam at age 59 from lung cancer.

Chapman’s ultimate view of Byas as a “sensitive and intelligent man” is an excellent and very worthy read.

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Old Knew
Gregory Groover Jr. (Criss Cross)
by Scott Yanow

NYC-born tenor saxophonist Gregory Groover Jr. studied and currently is on faculty at Berklee College of Music. He has developed his own pleasing sound, with a generally quiet, inventive style. His latest, *Old Knew* follows his previous albums: *Negro Spiritual Songbook Vol. 1 & 2* and Groover’s 2024 Criss Cross debut, *Lovabye*. As was true of the latter title, his latest is most notable for the saxophonist’s interplay with vibraphonist Joel Ross. They clearly think along similar lines, basing their playing more on a piece’s melody and mood than on its chord changes. The two are joined by Paul Cornish (piano), whose understated contributions should not be overlooked, Harish Raghavan (bass) and Kendrick Scott (drums)—a piano trio that forms a very complementary and stimulating rhythm section.

Church music is part of Groover’s background, as is his strong attachment to the concept of family, which is reflected in some of song titles that comprise the album’s ten originals. There are two dedications to his grandparents: “551” is the address of the church that he attends, and “Go for Broke” was inspired by a sermon. However, the music performed, which also

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