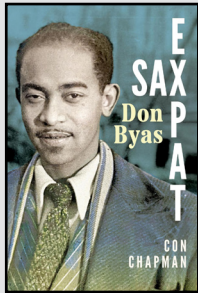


IN PRINT



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.

For more info visit upress.state.ms.us



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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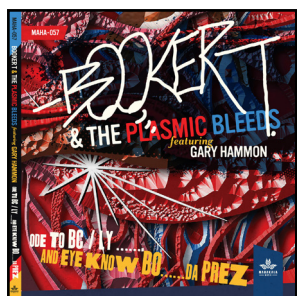
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includes Jason Moran's "Retrogate", is not overtly spiritual. While it is doubtful that any of the songs are melodic enough to become future standards, they do succeed at being challenging for the musicians, yet certainly accessible for listeners. Among the highlights are the jittery, rhythmic theme of "Spaces"; the leader's relaxed playing over the unpredictable accents of "551" (dancing to this song would be an achievement); Ross' thoughtful statements on "Rain Shall Fall"; the simple nine-note phrase on "Sumner", which is answered by the musicians as if they were a church congregation; and the Stan Getz-inspired tone that the leader displays during the energetic "William and Vinson".

Gregory Groover Jr. proves disciplined enough to get his message across very quickly, with only five of the eleven performances on the album exceeding five minutes, and not by much at that. A mature soloist, he clearly has many significant recordings in his future and *Old Knew* reveals itself to be a strong step forward in his career.

For more info visit crisscrossjazz.com. The album release concert is at Bar Bayeux Feb. 11. See Calendar.



To BC/LY...And Eye Know BO...da Prez
Booker T. & The Plasmic Bleeds (Mahakala Music)
by Ken Waxman

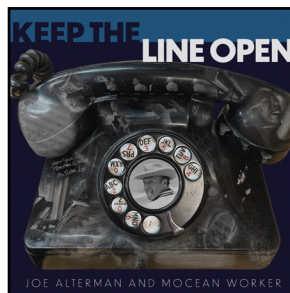
One of the often-overlooked free jazz musicians of the last century, Seattle-based saxophonist septuagenarian Booker T. (Williams) recorded sessions with the likes of veteran drummers Denis Charles, Andrew Cyrille and William Hooker in the '80s and '90s, then receded from view. Other than his stunning debut album, *Go Tell It On The Mountain* (Silkheart, 1988), *To BC/LY...* is his only commercially available set as a leader since, preserving much of his unfettered improvisation on tenor and alto; but some tracks' brevity and inconsistency of vision at times suggests a rehearsal rather than a developed program. Put together in Little Rock, AR, in 2022, the recording also includes Marc Franklin (trumpet), Gary Hammon (tenor), Chad Fowler (stritch), Christopher Parker (piano), Luke Stewart (bass), Chad Anderson (drums) and the vocals of Kelley Hurt—most of whom Booker T. had never played with before.

This combination connects on longer tracks, especially when the leader gives full rein to his intense mixture of Coltrane and gospel inflections, which include double-tonguing and yelping overtones, sopranissimo screams and fragmented honks and reflex. He's not overly solemn either, angling quotes from "Dixie" and "Happy Birthday" into the otherwise measured "Stay Alert". Often, on electric bass, Stewart preserves the steadying groove, notably on "Simontov", intensifying a blues feeling, while powerful trumpet triplets and the other reeds' antiphony add to the elation. Parker's modal comping is presented with equal resolve and reflection: the latter quality is played up on "Are You for Me?", a sweetened ballad that Hurt caresses beside reed obligatos. Involving herself in the ascending free flow that is "Mama Cries", her near orgasmic warbling locks in with busy bass thumps and the horns' nephritic screams and slurs. But there's a bit of confusion as to who takes which solo on the extended tracks, plus four terse variants of the title track that sound more like practice runs than the salutes to presidents Clinton and Obama they are purported to be. At the top of the session someone is heard saying "the more imperfect

it is, the better...if it's too perfect we have a problem... human beings, we're not perfect," which could sum up the thinking behind this recording session.

Since Booker T.'s playing appears undiminished, perhaps someone else will build on this release to record him again in a more formal setting.

For more info visit mahakalamusic.com



Keep The Line Open
Joe Alterman/Mocean Worker (MOWO!)
by Pierre Giroux

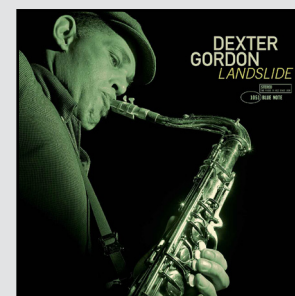
Some tributes respectfully honor the past, while others feel a stronger duty to keep the spirit alive and thriving in the present. *Keep The Line Open*, the inspired collaboration between pianist-composer Joe Alterman and bassist-producer Mocean Worker, certainly falls into the latter category. Framed as a celebration of the ebullient pianist-vocalist Les McCann (1935-2023), the nine-track set captures not only the sound of a jazz-soul legend but also the infectious feeling he created: joyful, communal, earthy and unreservedly grooving.

From the opening bars of the first selection, McCann's "I Love It! I Love It! I Love It!", Alterman and Worker clearly state their intentions: this release is not a museum piece. By blending live performance with sampling, they embrace the genre-bending style McCann promoted long before such hybrid ideas became trendy. The grooves are heavy, the backbeat steady and the sense of occasion unmistakable. The tune heavily leans into the backbeat, with the repetition of the title phrase becoming a mantra, reminding us that jazz, at its most vital, has always known how to move a room. The inclusion of McCann's "Burnin' Coal" acts as both a tribute and a reaffirmation. With background hand clapping, Alterman moves across the keyboard with raw energy, reinterpreting the piece with affectionate freedom, while allowing his own voice to shine through. "Gimme Some Skin" stands out as an exceptionally funky statement of purpose, with Worker's bass-driven swagger and Alterman's clipped-keyboard figures locking into a groove that feels both relaxed and commanding. "Moses Gonzales" introduces a vibrant Latin influence, with Alterman and Worker providing syncopated rhythms and melodic accents that feel sunny and celebratory; the tune blends its influences naturally, allowing the groove to find its own space while maintaining energetic momentum. "Lemme Tell You Somethin'" firmly grounds the project in the present. Its modern pulse, layered textures and contemporary attitude showcase how McCann's individuality translates effortlessly into today's musical language. The interpretation of the closing track, "Wouldn't It Be Lovely" (written by Lerner & Loewe for the 1956 Broadway musical *My Fair Lady*), gives Alterman a chance to impress with his remarkable stride-piano skills, playing with lively spirit and confidence, connecting the early jazz-piano tradition to the soul-jazz continuum that McCann helped popularize.

Ultimately, *Keep The Line Open* succeeds because it understands McCann's greatest gift: making music that leaves you happy and ready to party.

For more info visit moceanworker.bandcamp.com. The album release concert is at Rizzoli Bookstore Feb. 22 (featuring Steven Bernstein and Lenny White). See Calendar.

DROP THE NEEDLE



Landslide
Dexter Gordon (Blue Note Tone Poet)
by Andrew Schinder

Late saxophone great Dexter Gordon (who was born 103 years ago this month) has cast a giant shadow on jazz—both figuratively and literally. The famously 6-foot-6-inch Gordon bore such nicknames as "Sophisticated Giant" and "Long Tall Dexter." But more than his height, he is remembered as one of the most brilliant, dulcet-toned tenorists of the mid-20th century. An early influence of the revered John Coltrane, Gordon's playing can be considered more potent, favoring straight-ahead, hard- and post-bop mastery over sometimes indulgent musical side quests. Gordon's saxophone playing was heavenly, and he was simply one of the coolest cats around.

Due to drug abuse and self-exile in Europe, his career had its peaks and valleys, but his high points marked some of the finest output in jazz history. *Landslide*, reissued by Blue Note's Tone Poet vinyl series in a 180gr pressing that, in typical fashion, sounds (and looks) fantastic, belongs among the finest in Gordon's catalog. Recorded during three separate sessions at Rudy Van Gelder's recording studio in 1961 and 1962, but not commercially released until 1980, this album may not be as historically significant as masterpieces such as *Go!* or *Our Man in Paris*, but it is nevertheless an essential part of Gordon's discography during arguably his most musically fertile period. During the sessions, he was joined by some of the era's finest—Tommy Turrentine and Dave Burns (trumpet); Kenny Drew, Sir Charles Thompson and Sonny Clark (piano); Paul Chambers, Al Lucas and Ron Carter (bass); and Philly Joe Jones and Willie Bobo (drums). It is a fascinating look into a lush period of jazz history wherein the older generation of Thompson and Jones could mix in comfortably with the younger Carter and Bobo.

Consisting of a mere seven tracks, the album leaves the listener wanting more, but nevertheless offers top-level appreciation *in toto*. Gordon's title track original and "Six Bits Jones" (Onzy Matthews) are the highlights. The former delivers evidence that the saxophonist wasn't just one of the period's finest players, but also was a fine jazz composer as well. The title track, which opens the album, features the saxophonist immediately announcing his presence with an energetic, stirring melodic motif. Gordon's horn is just as captivating on "Six Bits Jones", where he not only delivers a saxophone clinic but shows tremendous chemistry both with Clark, whose piano is this selection's backbone, as well as trumpeter Burns, who more than holds his own.

Notably, *Landslide* also features the Billy Eckstine and Gerald Valentine "Second Balcony Jump", which later appeared on the more famous *Go!*. While the later version may be slightly more of a finished product, Gordon's solo on the earlier of the two recordings certainly does not lack for power.

For more info visit bluenote.com/artist/dexter-gordon