

Euphonic Gumbo, Benko's fourth recording, brims with exuberance, capturing the spontaneity of the couple's Mardi Gras concerts at Birdland. The album draws deeply on the history and sound of New Orleans, stirring together African-derived syncopation, brassy parade-band horns, early jazz swagger, Cajun fiddle, folk balladry and ragtime. Recorded live, the seven-piece ensemble moves fluidly from hot-jazz polyphony to earthy R&B-style horn lines, led and anchored by Yeager (piano, organ, celeste), with Ron Wilkins (trombone), Andy Warren (trumpet), Linus Wyrtsch (clarinet), and a vibrant rhythm team in Michael O'Brien (bass) and Jay Sawyer (drums). Also appearing on the album are Sasha Papernik (accordion), Justin Poindexter (banjo, strings) and Gabe Terracciano (violin), each of whom add vivid colors steeped in Cajun and Creole traditions. Tap artist John Manzari supplies a rare, kinetic layer of percussion, further expanding the band's rhythmic palette.

"Do You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans?" (Eddie DeLange, Louis Alter) is a standout track. Benko's supple phrasing and actorly diction chart a path from gentle reminiscence to deep longing, like memories rising and receding. The album's most affecting moments arrive in its ballads, especially Benko's intimate storytelling on the traditional "The Lake of Pontchartrain". For "J'ai Passé Devant Ta Porte" (traditional), Yeager conjures a front-porch band atmosphere with layered overdubs of violin, banjo, guitar and accordion, giving Benko space to voice love, loss, and yearning. "(Won't You Come Home) Bill Bailey" (Hughie Cannon) is gleeful and high-spirited, showcasing the vocalist shifting effortlessly from brassy belt to intimate, conversational delivery and wordless improvisation. On the traditional (and many-versioned) "St. James Infirmary", Wilkins' trombone, and his improvisations on the melody, sound at their most mournful. Tap dancer Manzari joins drummer Sawyer in an exuberant rhythmic dialogue, underscoring this release's guiding spirit: joy and celebration, as well as grief, all held in the same groove.

For listeners who can't hop on a plane to New Orleans, but crave an uplifting escape, this recording offers a warmly transporting alternative.

For more info visit club44records.com. The album release concert is at Birdland Feb. 16. Benko is also at 92NY Feb. 23. See Calendar.



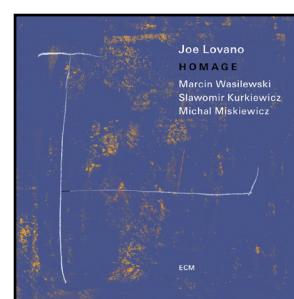
Window
Kirk Knuffke (Royal Potato Family)
by Ken Waxman

Two decades after establishing himself with his own groups and as a valued associate with advanced players such as Matt Wilson and Matthew Shipp, cornetist Kirk Knuffke debuts a hitherto hidden talent as a singer on *Window*. Still, the vocal window revealed isn't opened too far. While no Louis Armstrong or other brass-playing singer, Knuffke offers a relaxed Mose Allison-like style restricted to a couple of rhythmic choruses, which ultimately doesn't detract from the session's main role: showcasing the interaction among three in sync, sophisticated instrumentalists during a baker's dozen of tracks.

Full partners in the endeavor are Stomu Takeishi (fretless five-string electric bass guitar), who has worked with the likes of Erik Friedlander and Steph Richards, and veteran Bill Goodwin (drums), who had long associations with Gary Burton and Phil Woods. Besides the expected rolls and backbeats, Goodwin also functions as a percussion colorist, accenting tunes with gong and cowbell-like resonances, kalimba-like strokes and taiko-drum resembling plops. He also contributes to the album's individuality by briefly reciting a William Blake poem on one track. Takeishi's thick pumps and subtle stops are further distinguished when he creates multi-string echoes on "Ballad", matching Knuffke's upscaled vamps and sunny grace notes. The leader's ambulatory expressions, often abated by walking bass lines and drum shuffles, include movement from portamento to Harmon-muted, note-bending squeaks and peeps on "Gong Suite-Part 2", with the equivalent idiophone rippling or the triplet flutters accelerating to an extended screech on "Carey", as clipped drum accents take on steel drum intimations. Oddly enough, "Heavy Times" is a swinging foot-tapper built around Goodwin's subtle brush work and Takeishi's open string cadences. Meanwhile, the extended "For Your Needing" offers most of the trio's elaborations in miniature. Moving over a near tuba-like rhythmic flatulence from Takeishi and what sounds like a metallic paradiddle race through pots, pans and cowbell reverberations from Goodwin, the cornetist rides along with animated brass smears, squeezes and slippery grace notes.

Knuffke may want to sing, but let's assume it's for respite rather than career-advancing popularity. Still, *Window*'s outstanding sounds means that this trio can easily advance musically without vocalization from anyone.

For more info visit royalpotatofamily.com. Knuffke is at Miller Theatre Feb. 7 (with John Medeski). See Calendar.



Homage
Joe Lovano (ECM)
by Jeff Cebulski

By autumn of 2023, when renowned saxophonist Joe Lovano convened with the Marcin Wasilewski Trio—Wasilewski (piano), Slawomir Kurkiewicz (bass) and Michal Miskiewicz (drums)—for a residency at the Village Vanguard, their musical brotherhood had been well established; in 2019 the group recorded and released *Arctic Riff* (ECM). Yet, for Lovano, the Vanguard concerts evinced a further step that needed to be documented. The quartet headed to Van Gelder studios, where, under Manfred Eicher's production, they recorded *Homage*, a relatively compact testimony to the transcendent unity Lovano felt. The crux of the album resides in three extended compositions: the title track (written for the 2023 celebration of Eicher's 80th birthday and performed at an ECM event in Hamburg), "Golden Horn" and "This Side—Catville". Among them are three shorter pieces, including Polish violinist Zbigniew Seifert's "Love In the Garden", and two asides, "Giving Thanks" and the percussive "Projection", which reflect the leader's more contemplative works.

"Love In The Garden" exemplifies the ensemble's uncanny improvisational intuition. The group selected

the ballad in the studio and proceeded to create an acoustic unveiling of Seifert's more electrified original. Lovano, bathed in Eicher's typically echoed ambiance, delivers a rubato-laden meditation over the trio's laid-back support. "Golden Horn" follows, demonstrating why this trio is a worthy complement to Lovano's vision. After Wasilewski and Kurkiewicz establish a repeating refrain, the saxophonist comes in to layer a lyrical commentary (swapping his tenor for tárogató, the Hungarian woodwind instrument), to which the pianist comps and responds, while bass and drums push forward. The title cut begins in abstraction, Lovano's lines on tárogató interacting in an avant garde call-and-response with the trio, before Wasilewski intercepts with a quasi-classical statement, to which the context is twisted with a groovy tenor solo. Bassist Kurkiewicz provides a bridge to another tárogató moment, which again changes the tone and leaves drummer Miskiewicz alone for a hushed solo, augmented by the leader's handheld bells. "Giving Thanks" is a quietly appreciative tenor solo moment before "This Side—Catville", a hipper excursion in the midst of the modal abstractions, features a saxophone/bass bop liaison. To close, Lovano wields his gongs as a blessing in "Projection".

One outstanding characteristic of Lovano's career is his choice of accompanists in whatever motif or ensemble he performs in. In the Marcin Wasilewski Trio, he has stellar companions and rapport in navigating yet another stage in a prolific career and endless musical journey, anointed with dignity and bright intuition.

For more info visit ecmrecords.com. Lovano is at Smoke Feb. 4-8 (as leader) and Village Vanguard Feb. 11-16 (with Trio Tapestry). See Calendar.

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