

Jones continues comeback with lush work in trio

BY JOSEPH BLAKE, TIMES COLONIST DECEMBER 9, 2008

OLIVER JONES

Second Time Around (Justin Time)

After a brief retirement from the stage and studio in the early years of this new century, Montreal-based veteran pianist Oliver Jones continues his comeback with this trio outing following last year's One More Time return to form. Joined by bassist Eric Lagacé and drummer Jim Doxas, Jones uncorks a series of lush, rhythmically sophisticated, lyrical performances. The trio produces a supple, intuitive group sound, with Lagacé's arco bass and Doxas' brushes the perfect foil for Jones' effusive and warm sound at the keyboard. He's one of this country's treasures.

JESSICA WILLIAMS

Songs for a New Century (Origin)

Like Oliver Jones, pianist Jessica Williams owes a large debt to Oscar Peterson. She acknowledges it with the gorgeous original, Dear Oscar, just one of the beautiful solo works on this collection.

Williams unleashes all of her playful, adventurous power on a wide-ranging repertoire of originals and Sonny Rollins' seldom-played gem, Blessing in Disguise. Without the aid of overdubs, Williams conjures up the Japanese koto and shamisen on the haunting Toshiko. Fantasia is an even more amazing display of her soulful, brilliant technique.

Is there another pianist who has incorporated the breakthroughs of giants Bill Evans and John Coltrane into such a unique, inspired synthesis? Jessica Williams is a wonder.

YOKO MIWA TRIO

Canopy of Stars (www.Yokomiwa.com)

Pianist Yoko Miwa leads an East Coast trio on this eclectic collection of 11 originals, including the ethereal title track, and the cinematic, paired pieces, Appalachian Trail (North) and Appalachian Trail (South). Drummer Scott Goulding's orchestral range of percussive sounds add another dimension to Miwa's keyboard pyrotechnics. This is glorious trio jazz.

CHRIS DONNELLY

Solo (Alma/Universal)

Young, University of Toronto-educated (he got a Masters of Music in Jazz Performance there) jazz pianist Chris Donnelly tackles a solo piano showcase for his recording debut...and what a debut! From the opening reading of Bill Evans' Very Early it's obvious that Donnelly is a brilliantly gifted improviser who is grounded in the music's historical development.

A pair of lovely originals follow, and then the pianist really cuts loose, demonstrating his awesome technique and touch on Bud Powell's Hallucinations. Donnelly's flashy reading of Charlie Parker's Donna Lee (Variations) is another showcase of the young player's mastery of bebop. The seven originals on this debut demonstrate where's he's probably heading...to the top of the jazz world.

MARK EISENMANN QUINTET

Veteran Toronto pianist Mark Eisenmann and his long-standing rhythm team of bassist Steve Wallace and drummer John Sumner are joined by saxophonist Pat LaBarbera and John MacLeod on flugelhorn on this collection of the pianist's bop-inspired originals. It's a lovely collection of quintet performances.

MacLeod's flugelhorn solo on the ballad M and M has a wise, less-is-more approach that carves to the core of the melody. Eisenmann follows with an equally succinct and moving meditation on the tune's chord changes. LaBarbera also adds his majestic sound to the mix on my favourite track, but there is beauty, swing and cool, collective blowing throughout this mainstream gem.

THE JOHN HICKS LEGACY BAND

Mind Wine (Savant)

When pianist John Hicks died in 2006, jazz lost one of its most masterful voices.

His wife, flautist Elise Wood-Hicks and pianist Larry Willis have assembled The John Hicks Legacy Band to keep alive the pianist's compositional legacy. They are joined here by saxophonist Craig Handy, trumpeter Eddie Henderson, and the rhythm duo of bassist Curtis Lundy and drummer Steve Williams on a repertoire of Hicks' melodic tunes and a CD-capping flute-piano duo reading of Ellington's Single Petal of a Rose. It's an emotion-laden, elegantly swinging collection of ballads, blues and rhythmically daring originals from the pen of one of the music's most lyrical writers.

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