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THE MODERN JAZZ QUARTET AT MUSIC INN/VOLUME 2

GUEST ARTIST: SONNY ROLLINS

". . . Music which is *both* created by the players *and* fully shaped by the composer". These words, written by the British jazz critic Francis Newton about Duke Ellington and his orchestra, apply with equal accuracy to The Modern Jazz Quartet and its composer John Lewis. Though the Quartet is guided and dominated artistically by John, each player in it is able to contribute creatively — one is tempted to say compositionally — to the final result in a manner almost non-existent in jazz since the great days of the Ellington band.

The varied talents of the four players have been blended into a well-defined single concept through years of musical and personal maturing together. For those who like such comparisons, the MJQ has brought into jazz the traditions of the great string quartets of our century. As with any chamber music group that plays and lives together over any length of time, the main problem is to survive the stresses and strains — the necessary give and take — that develop out of the virtues and failings of the individual members. If an ensemble can endure this fire-baptism, so to speak, it can face purely musical problems with confidence. The musical excellence of The Modern Jazz Quartet is in a large measure founded upon a complete understanding of each member's personal and musical characteristics. Through many years of working together, a complex, subtle relationship has developed which permits each player to be completely himself, at the same time adapting himself quite instinctively and naturally to the specific talents (and needs) of the other members.

The Quartet has achieved this symbiotic fusion to such a remarkable degree, that it can take material like the ballads on this record and make it wholly its own in a very special way. For as they play, we hear not merely a performance, but actually a form of recomposition. In this particular case, as an added fascination, John and Milt apply their unique talents via simultaneous improvisation — an aspect of jazz performance rarely neglected for some thirty five years. The rambling, discursive nature of their playing reminds one of a highly intelligent, animated conversation. There are wonderful moments as the piano and vibe lines intertwine in the same register, causing delightful, subtle clashes that are the height of contrapuntal ingenuity — all the more intriguing because they are spontaneous. Notice, too, how the ornate opening and closing glissandos frame the *Medley* like a parenthesis.

In *Yardbird Suite* John skillfully states Parker's thematic material in fragmentation. Each fragment appears in single or unison lines in various instruments, disconnected from its predecessor, as if suspended in space. Gradually the music becomes more continuous, the fragments overlapping like clouds drawing together in a threatening sky. This imaginative introduction then gives way to a virtuosic trop-time chorus by Milt (and Counte), in turn leading to two choruses by John which feature his familiar light touch and melodious continuity. A chorus, in which Percy and Connie reiterate material from the introduction, modulates to an abbreviated solo by Milt. Instead of finishing with the final eight bars, John brings things to a halt with a quick series of canonic imitations based on the first ten notes of Parker's memorable theme.

Festival Sketch, recorded here for the first time, is, besides *Midsummer*, the only outright composition by John Lewis on this record. Again the introduction attracts us with its characteristic modesty and simplicity, at times so more than implying the underlying harmonies. The extemporized sections are examples of the unique mastery with which both John and Milt control their musical inspiration. On the ballads we hear simultaneous improvisation; *i.e. John no longer merely accompanied, but played melodic extemporizations of equal importance to Milt's lines. If we might call this a kind of "minimum participation" with the soloist, we could call what John does behind Milt on Yardbird Suite — simple "comping" chordal backgrounds — "minimum participation". Now on Festival Sketch John presents us with several subtle gradations between these two opposites. For here he plays melodic groups that are more than mere background "comping, and yet are not quite full-fledged improvisations on a level with that of the soloist. Listen to the effortless manner with which John switches from this intermediary kind of extemporization to feather-light chord accompaniment without the slightest loss of continuity. And listen too, if you will, to how naturally and effortlessly the group swings, especially at the beginning of John's chorus. My only complaint is that these solos and this piece are much too short. With characteristic modesty, John adhered to the implications of the title: it was intended only as a sketch.*

Midsummer was originally composed for a nine-piece group and first performed at a concert in Town Hall in 1955. It has since been orchestrated for symphony orchestra (and thus recorded), and here we find it adapted to the needs of the Quartet. Once more John has fragmentized the original expositional material, and has concentrated primarily on the improvised sections. Both Milt and John play with extraordinary warmth and a haunting lyrical quality that extracts the essence of this nostalgic musical picture. Among the many special moments in this performance, I would single out the beautiful touch and singing quality of John's piano after the introductory fragments (and after Connie twinkles from triangle to cymbals), and the sublime interlacing lines that John and Milt devise in a later section based on a chromatically descending chord progression. In listening to this track, it also occurred to me that I had seldom heard the piano timbale — the tiki mand-by clicks of every movie house and bar room pianist — used so effectively and with such sensitivity.

Sonny Rollins' prodigious creative talents and great instrumental mastery are too well known to need re-emphasis here. The two tracks which bring Sonny together with the Quartet were recorded during a concert at Music Inn in Lenox, Massachusetts in August 1958, and mark the first meeting on records of these musicians since 1953.

Sonny was in one of his more whimsical and sardonic moods that night. On both tracks we hear him playing around with little motives, toying with them and his instrument — almost as a cat will with a mouse — spoofing and kidding, at times facetious and at others pleasantly arcane. Sonny's unswerving insistence on being funny produces a very interesting by-play of reactions in the Quartet. Milt and Connie buckle down to some real great, swinging playing — Milt especially in his own *Bags' Groove* and Connie in *Tunisia*. Percy occasionally joins the fun, as in *Bags' Groove*, where he plays, for instance, a typical "oom-pah" bass line which could be, except for its funky swing, straight out of some band band.

John's reactions are more complex in *Bags' Groove* when Rollins enters with humorously disjointed parodies of Milt's theme. John prods him soberly with beaut-ful sustained chords. After three choruses he realizes that Rollins will not be swayed, and "joins in" with little dissonant semi-tone "bleeps", which later he develops into a relentlessly building, insinuating thyr-stic figure, which Sonny finally can no longer resist. He almost becomes serious for a few choruses, only to return eventually to the prevailing punning mood.

John Lewis is known far and wide as one of the more serious and staid members of society. But it may not be amiss to point out in connection with the above remarks, that John is also a serenely happy, optimistic individual. And these qualities are reflected in his music and in the music of The Modern Jazz Quartet — it seems to me, especially so on this record. This explains to a great extent why the music of the MJQ gives so much pleasure. Much has been said about John Lewis' musical tradition, his logical mind and non-compromising character. But it seems to me, not enough has been said about the sheer charm of his music, the fact that it is a continuous aesthetic pleasure — beautiful, if you will — happy, optimistic, well-adjusted music. And I think therein, beyond all musicological and technical considerations, lies the secret of the success of The Modern Jazz Quartet.

GUNTHER SCHULLER

SIDE ONE

1. MEDLEY
   a) STARDUST
      (By Hoagy Carmichael & Mitchell Parish; Mills, ASCAP.)
   b) I CAN'T GET STARTED
      (By Vernon Duke & Ira Gershwin; Chappell, ASCAP.)
   c) LOVER MAN
      (By Jimmy Davis, Roger "Ram" Ramirez & Jimmy Sherman; Pickwick, ASCAP.)
   (Total time of Medley: 8:17)
2. YARDBIRD SUITE
   (By Charlie Parker; Atlantic, BMI. Time: 5:13)
3. MIDSUMMER
   (By John Lewis; MJQ Music, BMI. Time: 7:03)

SIDE TWO

1. FESTIVAL SKETCH
   (By John Lewis; MJQ Music, BMI. Time: 3:43)
2. BAGS' GROOVE
   (By Milt Jackson; Wemar Music, BMI. Time: 8:33)
3. NIGHT IN TUNISIA
   (By Dizzy Gillespie & Frank Paparelli; Leeds, ASCAP. Time: 6:37)

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The Modern Jazz Quartet (John Lewis, piano; Milt Jackson, vibraharp; Percy Heath, bass; Connie Kay, drums) plays the Medley, Yardbird Suite, Midsummer & Festival Sketch.

Guest artist Sonny Rollins, tenor sax, joins The Modern Jazz Quartet on Bags' Groove & Night In Tunisia.

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Recording engineer: Tom Dowd
Cover photo: Clemens Kalischer
Cover design: Marvin Israel
Supervision: Nesuhi Ertegun

This is a high fidelity recording. Transfer from master tapes to master lacquers is made on Ampex Model 300 Tape Recorder, Scully Variable Pitch Lathe, and Cook Lateral Feedback cutterhead. The variable pitch control of the Scully Lathe widens the grooves for loud passages and narrows them during quieter sections, saving cutting space on the record and forming the light and dark patterns that can be seen on the surface of the pressing. The Ampex amplifier compound is used, and the records are pressed on the new Boomerang process. For best results observe the R.I.A.A. high frequency roll-off characteristic with a 500 cycle crossover.

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Sonny Rollins appears by arrangement with MGM Records.

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