

Steve Pouchie *North By Northeast*

LATIN JAZZ ALIVE

★★★★

Patrons in Manhattan clubs may be content to sit reverently hushed while listening to jazz. But just a few miles away in the Bronx—the borough Steve Pouchie And His Latin Ensemble call home—club-goers want much more. They demand high-quality music, plentiful food and, when the spirit strikes, they want to dance. That spirit is central to vibraphonist Pouchie's third disc, a set mixing originals and smartly re-arranged covers.

Pouchie's compositions favor simple ear-grabbing melodies, as heard on the cooker "The Cell." Occasionally he does stretch further, as when the feverish rhythm section goads him during

Chris Biesterfeldt *Phineas*

BIEST 1002

★★★★½

Pianist Phineas Newborn Jr. died over 25 years ago, destitute and under-recorded, at the age of 57. In his prime, he was one of the most technically gifted pianists to swing a trio. His legacy lives on in the seemingly impossible two-handed runs captured on such albums as *We Three* (1958) and *The Newborn Touch* (1964), but he has never been held in as high regard as other nimble pianists like Art Tatum and Oscar Peterson. Guitarist Chris Biesterfeldt is doing his part to keep Newborn in the conversation.

Completing the trio of challenging last names is upright bassist Matthew Rybicki and drummer Jared Schonig. The band doesn't aim to replicate or overtake the Newborn songbook, instead using his recordings as loose source material for their funky forays. Like Tatum and Peterson, Newborn was a gifted interpreter. Thus only three songs on the album are penned by him, with the bulk of the material coming from other notable jazzmen. "Cookin' At The Continental" burns with a breathless solo from Biesterfeldt that covers the full range of the instrument. A confident and straightahead "Juicy Lucy" features a solo from Rybicki that is patient and wonderfully disjointed. "Manteca," a tune that Newborn positively demolishes on *A World Of Piano!* with Paul Chambers and Philly Joe Jones, is taken in a different direction. Instead of the manic bombast that marks the

"Tunisia By Day," a winning, energized cut that humorously offers a melody-altered slant on "A Night In Tunisia."

Ace conguero and co-producer Wilson "Chembo" Corniel is a strong presence throughout. So it's not surprising that the groove-o-meter stays pegged to the max. He's supported by drummer Diego Lopez, who injects hip contemporary touches, the urgent and solid bassist Solo Rodriguez and tasty keyboard compers Sam Barrios and Adan Perez. Special kudos go to tenor man Julio Botti, who spins out some of the set's finest solos.

Old school is embraced throughout and Pouchie hits pay dirt by reaching way back with the irresistible floor-filler "Frenesi Cha-Cha." Such positive spirit defines the disc. A telling moment is heard when the band abruptly shifts into "Somewhere" during their "West Side Story Medley." The usually plaintive tune of doomed lovers is transformed into an uplifting dance floor joy. Pouchie's band convinces us, "Hey, maybe there really is a place for us." —Jeff Potter

North By Northeast: North By Northeast; The Cell; Frenesi Cha-Cha; West Side Story Medley; Tus Ojos; Tunisia By Day; My Favorite Things; A Mis Contrarios; Cuban Chant; Triste Y Alegre. (59:00)

Personnel: Steve Pouchie, vibes, marimba; Wilson "Chembo" Corniel, congas, bongo, cowbell, shekere, batá; Julio Botti, tenor saxophone; Solo Rodriguez, bass; Diego Lopez, drums; batá; Adan Perez, keyboards (1, 2, 6, 8); Sam Barrios, keyboards (3–5, 7, 9, 10); Joe DeJesus, Cuban flute (3); Ariel Santiago, flute (9); Charles Alletto, guitars, tres (10); Guido Gonzalez, trumpet (1, 4); Andy Hunter, trombone (1, 4); Jorge Maldonado, vocals (3, 5); Román Diaz, batá, vocals (7).

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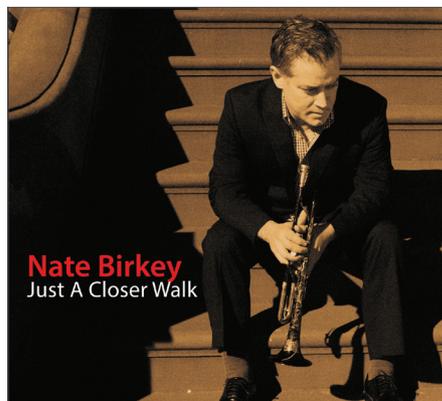
Newborn version, Biesterfeldt goes for a swinging chicken scratch that culminates in a popping solo from Schonig over the tune's introductory riff. Throughout the recording, Biesterfeldt attacks each tune with a madman's spirit, bouncing from chords and single lines at the speed of light. This album stands on its own as an invigorating trio recording while paying homage to one of the undersung greats of jazz.

—Sean J. O'Connell

Phineas: Harlem Blues; Sugar Ray; Cookin' At The Continental; The Midnight Sun Will Never Set; Caravan; Reflection; Juicy Lucy; Domingo; Phineas; Manteca; Sweet And Lovely; Theme For Basie; Blues From Phineas. (69:41)

Personnel: Chris Biesterfeldt, guitar; Matthew Rybicki, bass; Jared Schonig, drums.

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Nate Birkey *Just A Closer Walk*

HOUSEHOLD INK 147

★★★★½

Over the course of his career, which spans nine releases as a leader, trumpeter and vocalist Nate Birkey has consistently cleaved to a less-is-more ethos, whether by virtue of his West Coast cool vibe or specific technical choices that prioritize feeling and lyrical expression.

That quality is particularly evident on *Just A Closer Walk*, Birkey's spiritually minded new studio album. The disc opens, appropriately, with a nod to Donald Byrd's 1963 gospel-jazz game changer *New Perspective*, which Byrd referred to as a "modern hymnal."

Yet where Byrd made Duke Pearson's stirring "Cristo Redentor" famous with the help of an eight-piece gospel choir, seven instrumentalists and his own clean and clear articulation, Birkey's take is introspective and mellow. A hushed fuzz of percussion juxtaposed against the restraint of Birkey's lines underscore the song's somber essence. "And It Can Be" takes that quietude a step further as Birkey, having put aside his usual mix of playing and singing for this all instrumental album, virtually transforms his trumpet into a human voice, complete with ranges of emotion that taper off into a diaphanous whisper at the song's end.

That's not to say *Just A Closer Walk* neglects the uptempo, New Orleans-inspired elements of the church music that influenced it. A playful rhythm section kicks things off with a parade beat on "What A Friend We Have In Jesus." As the tune progresses, a series of occasionally knotty improvisations update the song's traditional foundation before a low piano refrain heralds a return to the opening rhythms. "His Eye Is On The Sparrow," meanwhile, nearly flirts with funk. Albums like this suggest Birkey is on his way out from under the shadow of all those early Chet Baker comparisons; his musical ideas deserve to stand on their own.

—Jennifer O'Dell

Just A Closer Walk: Cristo Redentor; What A Friend We Have In Jesus; And It Can Be; His Eye Is On The Sparrow; If Thou But Suffer God To Guide Thee; O Sacred Head, Now Wounded; Just A Closer Walk With Thee; Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus; The Deacon; Soon Ah Will Be Done. (55:04)

Personnel: Nate Birkey, trumpet; Tom Buckner, tenor saxophone; Jamieson Trotter, piano; Jim Connolly, bass; Peter Buck, drums.

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