

John Di Martino - Magical Mystery (2007)

Written by bluesever

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01. *Epistrophy* – 4:58 02. *Criss Cross* – 5:42 03. *Bemsha Swing* – 4:46 04. *Ask Me Now* – 5:56 05. *Rhythm-A-Ning* – 4:29 [play](#) 06. *'Round Midnight* – 8:07 07. *Well You Needn't* – 3:15 [play](#) 08. *Pannonica* – 6:08 09. *Eronel* – 5:41 10. *Ugly Beauty* – 5:33 11. *Magical Mystery (for Monk and Murakami)* – 6:26 12. *Blue Monk* – 5:54 13. *In Walked Bud* – 5:50

Personnel: John DiMartino – piano; Essiet Okon Essiet - bass; Victor Jones – drums.

The music of Thelonious Monk has long fascinated jazz musicians for its many challenges, including lines that are simultaneously dissonant yet accessible, plus the sudden changes thrust upon them. Pianist John Di Martino's Romantic Jazz Trio has a conventional looking lineup, while the band Strayhornmonk is a pianoless group featuring two alto saxophonists sharing the lead. Both units find fresh areas to explore within Monk's repertoire.

Di Martino is a Manhattan-based pianist who has had a lot of success recording for the Japanese label Venus. *Magical Mystery* has nothing at all to do with the Beatles; his latest incarnation of his Romantic Jazz Trio consists of veteran bassist Essiet Okon Essiet plus drummer Victor Jones.

Of the 70 published Monk compositions, two dozen or so are performed more often than the rest. With that thought in mind, it is more difficult for a pianist to break new ground on a record date, though Di Martino has a few twists in store. Monk's "Epistrophy" alternates between an intense staccato attack and a straight-ahead bop groove. "'Round Midnight" is easily Monk's best-known work; Di Martino doesn't overly attempt to stretch the boundaries of its theme, but improvises thoughtfully while maintaining the essence of its haunting melody. The fun romp through "Well, You Needn't" contrasts with the relaxed setting of "Eronel." Di Martino's lyrical title track is a tribute to Monk and (presumably) Japanese novelist Haruki Murakami, an

enjoyable piece that doesn't attempt to mimic Monk's writing style.

An occasional tribute band incorporates the name of its inspiration, but the quartet Strayhornmonk, consisting of alto saxophonists Gabriel Dalvit and Nat Su, bassist Andreas Zitz and drummer Claudio Str?by, honors both Monk and Billy Strayhorn, two composers who couldn't be more unlike.

Monk's music is the dominant element of their eponymous CD, consisting of seven selections. "Four in One" is typical of their efforts, with Dalvit and Su playing independent lines yet remaining in focus of one another in a brisk arrangement. The two saxophonists engage in a spacey duet that gradually takes shape as the familiar "Ask Me Now" as the rhythm section makes its entrance. "Monk's Point" began life as solo vehicle for the composer and was later orchestrated by Oliver Nelson for a large ensemble. This sprightly version features a single sax with drums, though the lack of liner notes leaves it unclear as to who is playing.

The three Strayhorn songs are performed with fewer frills. Str?by's unusual cadence behind the saxophones in "Blood Count" make the piece sound more like a funeral march than a rage against the pain of a killer disease (this was Strayhorn's final composition as he lay dying of esophageal cancer in a hospital). "U.M.M.G." (named for the Upper Manhattan Medical Group, home to Strayhorn's physician) is the best arrangement of the three Strayhorn pieces, an upbeat reworking of this well-known theme that conveys the hustle and bustle of a busy metropolitan doctor's office. But "Isfahan" relies so much on the sax interplay that it proves distracting at times.

One wonders whether this is a one-off project or that Strayhornmonk will continue to explore the repertoire of both composers. While their debut effort is not flawless, their arrangements never bore. ---Ken Dryden, allaboutjazz.com

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