

Konitz Mehldau Haden Motion – Live At Birdland (2009)

Written by bluesever

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1. *Lover Man* 2. *Lullaby of Birdland* 3. *Solar* 4. *I Fall in Love too Easily* 5. *You Stepped out of a Dream* 6. *Oleo* Personel: Lee Konitz: alto saxophone Brad Mehldau: piano Charlie Haden: double-bass Paul Motian: drums

A quartet of master musicians and a programme of jazz classics. Live At Birdland presents the finest moments from two inspired nights at New York's legendary club, as Konitz, Mehldau, Haden and Motian play "Loverman", "Lullaby Of Birdland", "Solar", "I Fall In Love Too Easily", "You Stepped Out Of A Dream" and "Oleo" with freedom, tenderness, and a love of melody that only jazz's greatest improvisers can propose.

On this live recording from New York's legendary club, an ensemble of history-making players dives into the music without a set list. Four exceptional jazz musicians -Lee Konitz, Brad Mehldau, Charlie Haden and Paul Motian - approach the standards from new perspectives and unusual angles. They play them with freedom, tenderness and a melodic and rhythmic understanding found only amongst jazz's greatest improvisers.

The recording was made at Birdland and mixed by Manfred Eicher and the quartet, with James Farber as engineer, at New York's Avatar Studios. Songs selected by this team from the performances of December 9 and 10, 2009, are: "Lover Man", "Lullaby Of Birdland", "Solar", "I Fall In Love Too Easily", "You Stepped Out Of A Dream" and "Oleo". Konitz has often said that he tries to play the material as if encountering it for the first time. With all four musicians listening intently, discoveries are continually made in the music.

"Lover Man", the ballad strongly associated with Billie Holiday (but also, for instance, with Lee

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Konitz and Gerry Mulligan at Newport) makes an arresting opening track, with the uniquely melancholy cry of Lee's alto sax to the fore. Mehldau's solo gives immediate notice of his architectural intelligence as a player, and in his subtle comping he continually builds bridges between the idiosyncratic playing styles of his associates. Haden's bass solo is characteristically soulful, Motian's deft brushes perfectly placed.

"Lullaby Of Birdland", composed in 1952, acquires additional poignancy through the recent death of its composer, George Shearing. (Lee Konitz, now 83, is said to be the only living jazz soloist to have played all of the diverse addresses of the Birdland club, starting in 1949.) The piece is driven here by the marvellous rhythmic interplay of Haden and Motian, their near-telepathic understanding honed long ago during their decade-plus association with Keith Jarrett in the 1960s and 70s.

"Solar" begins with an abstract clarion call from Konitz. "Mr. Konitz, with a piece of fabric stuffed into the bell of his horn to mute it, started playing Miles Davis's 'Solar' and Mr. Motian joined in, followed by the others. A skeletal groove emerged...", wrote Ben Ratliff in the NY Times. Mehldau's solo is a marvel of invention, lifted up by the waves of Motian's wayward drums. "I Fall In Love Too Easily" is a touching rendition of the Jule Styne ballad (a song first intoned by Frank Sinatra in 1945) with fine outlining of the melody by Mehldau, and Konitz almost Ornette-like in his phrasing. The singing quality of the performance is extended in Haden's heartfelt solo.

"You Stepped Out Of a Dream" was previously recorded by Konitz, Mehldau and Haden for a Blue Note trio album 1997: the powerful presence of Paul Motian on the present recording transforms it completely. Sonny Rollins's "Oleo" is given one of the freest performances of the set, beginning with a beautifully elastic Konitz/Motian duet. Brad Mehldau has commented on the performance's cool chromaticism, allied to the rhythmic phrasing of bebop, until the tune is deconstructed in the final moments of collective soloing. When these musicians play the standards, they do indeed make them new. ---Editorial Reviews

This bear of an album features four jazz lions, captured live in two nights at Birdland in December of 2009. Alto saxophonist extraordinaire Konitz was eighty-two at the time, drummer Motian and bassist Haden weren't that far behind him at seventy-eight and seventy-two respectively. Mehldau seems a mere babe by comparison at thirty-nine but had been

captivating jazz audiences with his creative piano work for twenty years.

The recording catches these four masters improvising on a set of standards, both pop and jazz. The reward to the listener isn't the chance to hear new compositions but to hear these four masters play impassioned, often lyrical, solos, extending themselves at length. The musicians all have time to stretch out. (The shortest piece runs ten minutes seventeen seconds and the longest fifteen minutes and twenty seconds.) There is a phenomenal rendition of "Lover Man," a kinky and fun "Lullaby of Birdland," Miles Davis's "Solar" and Sonny Rollins's "Oleo," the pop standards "I Fall in Love Too Easily" and "You Stepped Out of a Dream."

It is evident that these four musicians enjoyed playing together. All four play well. But Konitz, he is best of all. The man plays as fluently and more passionately as he did fifty years ago. (If ever the label 'cool' applied to him, it hasn't for the last thirty or forty years.) How does he keep so young? Playing out of the bop/postbop mode he imbibed half a century ago playing with Lennie Tristano and Warne Marsh and the Kenton band, he continues to surprise with his energy and his unbelievable inventiveness.

This is not to insult the other players. They are giants in their own accord. Haden's deep woody sound and melodic playing masks a keen knowledge of the rhythmic and melodic displacements required of modernist jazz. His solos are always worth savoring. As for Mehldau, he continues to surprise. He can move from lyrical to idiosyncratic in seconds, and his solo stretches are always interesting and coherent. Note especially his quirky solo on "Lullaby of Broadway," where at moments he almost seems to channeling Dave Brubeck, circa the early fifties, before Columbia took Brubeck over and made him a mass-market commodity. Motian is good -he's never bad- but his work is the least satisfying on the record. At times it's perfect for the ensemble -using his minimalized drum set, he produces a string of taps, nudges and whirs that dance along beside the melody rather than a steady pulse of drumbeats. At other times, and especially during his accompaniment for "Lullaby," he sounds intrusive and even clunky. (I had the same complaint about his drumming on the Martial Solal album, Just Friends, 1998. The drummer's usually impeccable sense of time, which underpins his use of off-time accents, fails him on this album at times, as on the earlier one.) Still, that's a small complaint about a very good album. All four of these musicians are National Treasures and we should buy their records while we can.

The recording was done by ECM, so the sound quality is flawless. ---David Keymer.
Amazon.com

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